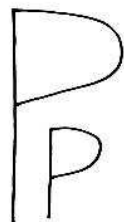


The Third Person



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Contents

1. [August](#)
2. [September](#)
3. [October](#)
4. [November](#)
5. [December](#)
6. [January](#)
7. [February](#)

I. August

Mon 1st August

Our mother says infants don't have language, and this means they don't have proper memories either, only fragments and broken impressions.

But I remember everything.

I remember touching his prickly beard when I was a baby, seeking out his lips with my fingertips. As I admired my reflection in the lenses of his glasses, a vast warm mouth would suddenly close over my hand and trap my fingers, making contented munching sounds.

His mouth always looked so lonely, tucked away in his beard.

Wed 3rd August

Even though she's only nine and should be playing proper games with children her own age, my little sister spends most of her time nursing her collection of houseplants. What a ludicrous hobby! Whenever I spy on her through the crack in her bedroom door, I see her crouching on the floor, curly black hair scraped back in a crooked ponytail, taking cuttings, putting seedlings in pots, tending and feeding and watering her specimens, humming made-up tunes to herself.

It's funny to watch her face when she doesn't know she's being observed, especially when she's having a conversation with herself. She looks like a cartoon character: eyebrows up, eyes left, eyebrows down, mouth down, eyes forward, eyebrows up, mouth up. It goes on for ages.

Gardening is for OAPs and idiots.

I barge into her room while she squats by an untidy row of seed-trays and tell her that I have given her an amusing new nickname.

'What is it?' she asks, looking pleased.

'You're called Whore from now on,' I tell her.

She protests, whining, saying that she doesn't want that name.

'You don't even know what it means!'

She says it doesn't sound very nice. After a pause, she asks, 'what's it called when someone makes words sound really difficult, like grownup words?'

I search for the right expression. 'Adulterate.'

‘Well, Lizzie,’ she comments primly, ‘sometimes you *adulterate* words, and I don’t know what you mean.’

But when I tell her that her new name is short for ‘horticulturalist,’ a term that is used in honour of good gardeners, she looks pleased again. She paws at my arm and says thank you in the annoying little-girl voice she always used with Dad. I hate that voice. It’s turned on deliberately to *melt* grownups. And look what she has done. She has melted our dad clean away.

Fri 5th August

I’m the first person to see everything around here.

I always inspect the post, but leave it where it falls unless there’s a letter for me in my dad’s writing. He always writes Elizabeth rather than Lizzie. You can tell he’s in a good mood if he deliberately sticks the stamp upside-down in the corner. When a letter arrived from New Zealand today, however, I noticed he had put the stamp the right way around. I spent the whole morning trying to work out if he was in a good mood or a bad mood because New Zealand is upside-down compared to us: therefore perhaps a stamp placed the right way up in New Zealand is a clever joke about me being upside down over here? Or perhaps he was angry again.

I’ve thought about it for hours and I still can’t decide.

When our mother emerges from her bedroom, rubbing her eyes, she scoops up all the letters, sorts the white envelopes from the brown ones, and puts them on the desk in her study.

Wherever she goes in the house these days, a cloud of cigarette smoke lingers around her head. Sometimes we can hardly see her face. When she cries, we see big drops of rain falling out of the cloud. Since *he* disappeared, the cloud has grown fatter and heavier: it sucks out all her energy. She says she’s too tired to play Scrabble or Monopoly any more in the evenings. She used to be fun. Now all her love seems to dangle over our heads, just out of reach. It’s lucky that I’m taller and stronger than Helen. I can reach higher.

Tues 9th August

Helen nudges open my bedroom door with her elbows, keeping a finger buried in each ear.

‘What’s happening?’ she whines. ‘What’s that noise?’

I jump up.

‘Out!’ I spit, trying to focus on her so I can push her out of my room.

‘You’re not allowed in here.’

I’ve been working on my Gothic script this morning. It takes a lot of skill and concentration, and the violent thumping sounds downstairs have barely registered in my thoughts. I’ve copied out the full alphabet in capital letters fifteen times in rapid succession. That’s 390 letters in the space of 150 minutes. That’s an approximate rate of one letter every 23 seconds. When I finish this exercise, I’m going to copy out Hamlet’s soliloquies in my neatest Gothic script.

‘It’s giving me a headache. What is it?’

I would probably find my sister less irritating if she didn’t whinge in a high-pitched voice whenever she opens her mouth. I’m the one with the headache. The sight of her is bad enough, but whenever she speaks it grates against my bones and makes me clamp my teeth together.

Children of her age should not be seen, and they should also not be heard.

I need to complete one more sheet of capitals, and then I’ll move onto the small letters.

‘If you’re so worried, go downstairs and find out,’ I tell her.

‘I’m scared. What if it’s beagles? Come with me.’ She says *beagles* instead of *burglars*.

‘You’re unbelievably stupid! Burglars try to be quiet, imbecile. Go away!’

I know she’s hovering on the landing in-between our bedrooms because I can hear the floorboards creaking gently.

I can’t *not* hear the noise now that she’s alerted me to it. The silences are more disturbing than the thumps. They open up a network of spaces where my imagination plants images of strange men raiding cupboards and drawers downstairs before hammering their way up to get me.

I try to focus on the sixteenth sheet of paper, crisp and blank, specially prepared for this moment. Unlike the other sheets, which I tore out of my A4 pad, this last page is good quality cartridge paper. Each line has been pricked out with a pin at half-inch intervals so that each letter of the alphabet will occupy an invisible box the same size as its neighbour. My fresh sheet awaits the curl-spike-curl of the beautiful Gothic parade.

One of my Rules is to make whatever I write as beautiful as possible.

The banging noise begins again downstairs.

I stamp out of the room, grabbing one of Helen's elbows on the way.

'Come on!'

When we get to the top of the stairs we start to tiptoe, just in case there are burglars in the house. We lean on the banisters and tread on the edges of each dusty stair to stop the boards creaking.

Normally, the kitchen door is propped open with an earthenware Victorian flask that our mother borrowed from my bottle collection but, to our amazement, today the door is firmly closed.

We stand outside for a while and listen.

Buried in the core of the banging noise we hear a strangulated gasp, rising and falling. Here's a sound I recognise at last. It reverberates through my memory, echoing all the way back to before I could speak.

Helen reaches out and tries to grab my hand, but I shake her off.

Tentatively, I twist the door handle and peep around the crack just in time to catch the first in a new series of thumps.

Everything in the kitchen is covered with a film of white powder, including our mother. She stands at the table holding a rolling-pin vertically over her head. Down it comes like a caveman's club, again and again. She's beating the living daylight out of a large grey thing on the table, hitting it with all her strength. The mixing bowl leaps up and down on the table, beside the ashtray and a half-empty packet of Marlboro.

'What're you doing?' Helen whines from the doorway.

Our mother looks up, but her face doesn't seem to register who we are. Her glasses, cheeks and forehead are covered with wet white streaks and there's sticky stuff in her hair. 'Sorry?'

Pebbles of putty dot the room. Helen repeats her question, and her whine gets even louder.

‘Do you need any help?’ I call calmly, in a voice strong enough to be heard above my sister’s racket. I know how to handle these situations. If a person is angry or upset, you mustn’t make them feel threatened by asking confrontational or silly questions, or bursting into tears.

Our mother still looks a bit confused. She sits down and reaches for her cigarettes.

Helen and I push forward a few inches into the kitchen. The air is full of white powder.

‘Can we help with what you’re doing?’ I ask.

Our mother’s chest heaves so much she can’t inhale her cigarette. I reach out for Helen’s hand and squeeze it, not too tightly this time.

‘No thank you, girls,’ our mother says, working hard to control her voice.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask next.

She turns her head towards the dead thing on the table. ‘Pizza bases,’ she says, gazing at the dough, exhaling a cloud of smoke at it.

‘Oh!’ we both say, together.

‘Everything’s gone wrong.’ She pronounces each word slowly.

The flesh around her eyes and cheeks is puffy, and her nose is bright red. When our mother cries, her sobs are silent, stealing quickly and quietly out of her mouth. When she cries, her face puffs up and slowly changes colour. After an hour or two, you can hardly see her eyes any more. Only then does she start to wail. Then she doesn’t stop for days. Me and Helen always try to intercept her at the puffing-up stage.

Helen drops my hand and moves deeper into the kitchen. ‘It’s okay. I know how to do pizza. I saw a man do it on telly.’

I try to snatch her arm, but she escapes.

‘You’re not supposed to hit it with a rolling-pin. You’re supposed to push it around, like this.’ Helen waves her hands helpfully in a dough-kneading motion.

Our mother blows her nose on a flour-covered paper tissue. ‘I don’t think I can cope any more.’

I relax a little because even though she's crying, I've heard her say this lots of times before. I sense that we are floating towards safe territory, away from days of wailing.

'Maybe we should all think about a holiday,' Helen says in her most grownup voice, moving towards our mother's chair. She heard Wendy Craig say that on *Butterflies*.

'Shall I make a cup of tea?' I ask, trying to deflect my sister's ridiculous suggestion.

I walk through the channel Helen's opened up in the carpet of flour and veer away when it gets to our mother's chair. I create a new channel leading up to the sideboard, and fill the kettle. But when I turn round to look, Helen has climbed onto our mother's lap and wrapped her arms round her sticky neck. A rope of smoke twists around their bodies, binding them together.

Sun 14th August

I wake up with a buzzing sensation in my stomach. When I roll onto my back and look at the ceiling, the buzz pushes its way into my throat and hovers there impatiently before moving into my ears. I know it's a bottle-hunting day.

I lie in bed and picture all those treasures peeping out of the mud, waiting to be found and brought home. Then it's impossible to stay indoors a minute longer because I'm bursting with excitement. I grab my tools out of the shed and leave number eleven immediately.

The banks on our side of the creek are covered with tall, golden grasses, transformed into hay over the summer. Swallows dart over the water and small gulls plod through the mudflats, heads dipping sporadically. Along the sea-wall, the mudflats have split into thousands of mosaic pieces, cracked and chiselled by months of heat, waiting for the autumn rain. The breeze scoops up flakes of mud in big handfuls and scatters them away towards the bone factory.

I discovered the old rubbish dump shortly after Dad disappeared. I was sitting cross-legged on top of my table staring out of my bedroom window one morning, trying to remember the funny angle he held his fork when he spiked a breakfast sausage, when suddenly the wasteland started to sparkle in the watery

sunshine on the other side of the creek. I thought it was fairy-dust, and ran out of the house towards it.

The old dump is half way up the flat road. I can see the back of the bone factory when I walk around inside the site, but nobody from the factory can see me because there aren't any windows in the corrugated walls of the warehouse on that side, just a row of grey plastic pipes jutting out of the building, covered with green slime. Sometimes brown liquid trickles out of the pipes and splashes thickly into the pool of water at the back of the factory.

The whole place is surrounded by a fence, and the rotten planks are plastered with signs saying, 'Danger Keep Out' and 'Trespassers will be Prosecuted.'

There's an opening behind a hawthorn bush where I can still crawl through, although since I first discovered this place I've grown a lot bigger, and I've had to loosen some extra planks on either side of the original hole.

My mother's size six wellies flap against my legs as I crawl in, dragging the fork through the gap behind me. Its teeth graze the verge. I need to carry a full-sized gardening fork because creek mud is heavy and sticky, and I need to dig down as far as possible. The more I go bottle-hunting, the more I manage to dig deeper into the mud. That's where the best treasure is hidden, lurking in the darkness. The mud is so thick it bends the teeth of smaller forks.

My pockets bulge with crumpled carrier bags. They crackle when I move. Gulls circle above me in the sky.

Everything else is completely still.

Coming through this fence seals me off from the rest of the world.

All the old rubbish pits are full of muddy water. I walk carefully along the uneven mounds dividing the pits from each another, using the fork to keep my balance. I never take my eyes off the shallows.

Flecks of white foam from the factory pipes nudge the shoreline.

The mud's slippery. Places that are firm one week can be soft the next, and my feet sometimes get stuck. Once I nearly had to leave a wellington boot behind, sticking out of the shallows, because the mud closed round my foot and gripped it so tightly I couldn't escape. This place isn't 'dangerous,' though. 'Dangerous' is people, not places.

Mud sticks to the fork when I dig, and I push the clods off with my foot.

The creek is tidal, so the mud's always shifting, pushing things up to the surface to be found.

Most of the bottles are broken, but when I find an intact one I squat down and swish it about in the shallows before putting it inside one of the carrier bags. When I rinse a bottle, I always think I can see the story inside it leaking into the water. If I find a rare item, like a clay pipe or a bottle with a marble in the neck or a blue poison bottle, there's a Rule that I'm not allowed to rinse it or inspect it until I get home. I put it straight in the bag, covered in mud, and try to imagine what it looks like all the way back to number eleven, how it's been perfectly preserved since Victorian times.

The bottles are always heavy with mud from a century of burial.

I'm allowed to imagine lots of things when I'm here in this place. Today I picture my dad coming home with armfuls of exotic gifts from all the countries he's visited this year. The presents are piled so high we can't see his face, but I know he's smiling. For me, he's brought a telescope. When handing it over, he whispers that he'll teach me how to use it. He's also brought me a set of twelve calligraphy pens with platinum nibs of different widths, and some sticks of gold, silver and bronze sealing wax. He's bought a diamond ring for our mother, to replace the one she sold to pay the legal fees. (For Helen he brings a pair of cheap plastic roller skates.) After a cup of tea in the kitchen, made by me, he asks politely if he can see my bottle collection. I take him upstairs and describe each exhibit on my special glass shelf, showing him the labels I'm in the process of writing in miniature Gothic script.

I always keep my bedroom spotlessly clean in case Dad comes back and wants to see it. I've designed three separate Exhibition Areas, one for my calligraphy, one for my bottles, and one for my sealing wax and seals. I also have an extensive personal library containing twenty-nine books arranged with my favourite one, *The Mill on the Floss*, first, followed by *The Lord of the Flies* and *Hamlet*. I had to wedge *Hamlet* on top of *The Lord of the Flies* because I like them both equally and they share second place. Third is *Crime and Punishment*. (I love the way Raskolnikov kills the old woman: he thinks it through so carefully before he does it.) Last on the shelf is the worst book ever written: *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott with those creepy goody-goody sisters and that irritating

sweet mother. I won't throw it away. I keep it on the shelf as a reminder. Sometimes I read it just to make myself angry.

I walk around the site and try to decide on a spot for today's excavation of bottles. A small mound beside a pool of water looks hopeful. I imagine a cluster of buried bottles lurking under the surface, and start to dig.

There are four Rules to bottle-hunting, and they must be strictly observed at all times:

When digging for bottles, you must insert the fork at a right-angle, and press firmly so that each tooth sinks smoothly into the mud.

If the fork hits a firm object, you must withdraw it instantly. Then you must move back half a footstep and reinsert the fork so that you are never to blame for breaking anything underneath the surface.

You are not allowed to bring anybody here with you.

You must daydream when you are here.

If I break a cardinal Rule, I have to smash one of my bottles when I get home. Not one of my ordinary bottles from the cardboard boxes in the shed, but one of the special bottles from the glass shelf in the Bottle Exhibition Area of my bedroom.

My bottle collection contains tiny blue poison bottles which are as delicate as spiders' webs, no bigger than my thumb. I also have two intact smoking pipes made of clay. They have brittle stems which look like slender bones, and you can still see yellow marks where the man sucked and puffed. I've got heavy earthenware beer bottles and flasks, too, like the one our mother borrowed to prop open the kitchen door, and disinfectant bottles, and countless translucent ink bottles with ridges on their shoulders to support the nibs of pens.

The fourth rule is the most difficult to follow, especially at the moment. The thing is, I can't stop thinking about why my dad went away, and whether I should have tried harder to stop him. I try to force myself to continue my daydream, where he returns home loaded with presents.

I've been concentrating so hard on digging that when I look up, my vision is blurred. Number eleven slowly comes into focus on the other side of the creek. As my eyes adjust, I catch sight of a figure gazing out of my bedroom window.

I grab my fork and carrier bags, and race home. My bedroom has a sign on the door, on the outside, saying 'No Entry.' It's the Golden Rule.

'Boots off! Outside!' my mother says the minute I come in. She waves an orange cloth in my face.

'Who's been in my room? Where's Helen?'

To my surprise, while I've been out our mother has vacuum-cleaned the whole house, washed the dirt off the skirting boards in the hall, and scrubbed the paintwork of all the downstairs doors and windows. She hasn't done this since before Dad went away.

'Who's been in my room?' I demand.

'I poked the vacuum cleaner through your door, darling, but it was so tidy in there I didn't need to spend more than a minute inside.' She's really happy for once.

'You're not allowed in there! Where's Helen?' I demand, eyeing the stairs.

'Gone to see friends or something. Down the road, I think.'

My mother's cheeks are pink. She takes a swipe at the study door with her cloth. I'm suspicious. All the brass handles gleam in the light. She makes me carry the muddy bags in one hand and the wellington boots in the other hand through to our back garden, where I am instructed to wait until she's filled a bucket with hot water and Fairy Liquid.

I sit on the back doorstep with the bucket, a nailbrush, a cloth, and an old crochet hook which I use for digging the mud out of the neck and body of each bottle. But I'm not in the mood to clean up my treasures now. Normally I can stay in my daydream all the way back from the dump until the last bottle is out of the bag and cleaned up. But now all I can think of is my mother snooping around in my bedroom, picking up my things. Or Helen.

The water is so hot that my fingers turn scarlet in the bucket.

My mother is in a good mood for once. She pops out every five minutes to ask what I've found, and if I need anything, but I can't be bothered to talk to her. Why's she so happy?

'Nothing. Just the usual stuff,' I mutter when she asks if I've uncovered any good specimens today. She pretends really hard to be interested in my finds: a Bovril bottle with a fat belly from the 1930s and some chipped Victorian ink bottles.

When she's out, I use the kitchen sink. It's far more comfortable to clean the bottles inside the house, even though I'm forbidden from doing so because the mud blocks our drains like glue.

The best things turn out to be broken when I dig out the mud.

Inside me, I know they'll be broken. That's why I'm not allowed to inspect them on site. But if a bottle is whole, I can't throw it away, no matter how many of the same type I have in my collection. That's because I've rescued it from burial in the mud. They've been thrown away once already. They survived. You can't reject something twice. It's bad luck.

I can imagine what it feels like to be buried alive like a bottle.

Our garden shed is packed to the ceiling with cardboard boxes containing all the bottles I've collected over the last year and a half. The boxes sag sadly, with damp bottoms and corners sucked by slugs. But inside each one, all my bottles are wrapped tenderly in newspaper and placed snugly side by side. I don't care if they're the same as each other.

But as I see each crack and chip emerge through the froth in the bucket, I try to call my daydream back, but I can't. It's gone.

Wed 17th August

From now on, I have decided to call our mother by her forename, Rebecca, because she has forfeited the right to be called Mum by letting my dad disappear like that.

Rebecca didn't try hard enough to make him stay. She is guilty on several counts, but I'm thinking especially of the occasion when we tried to eat the meal he cooked, but couldn't. Of course, Helen made the situation a whole lot worse, sitting there at the table howling with all her lung-power, huge-mouthed, shoulders sagging, tears heaving down her face like runaway tadpoles.

I tried to concentrate on keeping my neck stiff because a lot of air was trying to get out of my mouth all at once. My chin twitched and puckered uncontrollably because I was trying not to cry.

We all should have tried harder, but most especially Rebecca because she's a grownup.

Usually the meals he cooked were delicious.

But this time he'd served lukewarm tinned tomatoes on white sliced-bread toast, with a wet lump of luncheon meat on the side of each plate. The tinned tomatoes looked like skinned animals floating in a watery pink pool on the toast.

I have to confess that I felt very disappointed in him. He knew I hated luncheon meat.

Rebecca kept pleading with him to come away from the table and discuss things in the study. When he refused, she insisted that Helen and I should be allowed to leave the table instead, as if we were babies.

He told us to stay right where we were and finish our meal.

Hannah said he was being deliberately provocative.

I could see that Helen wanted to leave the table. I started to feel that I might want to leave the table too, maybe in the next ten minutes or so, but nobody asked us and we weren't allowed to interrupt.

Our mother should have left it to me.

The thing is, I knew how to handle him when he was acting like this. But because she made everything worse, he started to bang the palm of his hand on the table and insist that we put every last morsel of the food in our mouths.

When he threatened to give us second helpings, I laughed with relief and looked at his face to confirm that his eyes were joking, but he kept thrashing his head from side to side, making it impossible for me to see what was going on.

Our mother wasn't trying to calm him down any more. She was being *deliberately provocative* in order to make the situation worse. She said she couldn't decide whether he was a talentless chef or a talentless show-off, but either way, he should start to act more like an adult and less like one of the kids in his drama class. With his culinary skills, she observed, he should go to work for Wimpy and give her some peace and quiet to finish writing her book.

But finishing her book was the funniest thing he'd heard for years. He couldn't stop laughing.

That's when Helen and I slipped off our chairs. We didn't even consult each other. We crept out of the kitchen and retreated to the staircase. I sat on the seventh stair. She sat somewhere underneath, but the main thing was we

debated the merits and flaws in each side's case until the noise calmed down in the kitchen. We were the staircase referees, ensuring fair play inside the ring.

Ever since Dad went away, Rebecca keeps asking me to brush her hair in the evenings. I don't like doing it because I don't like touching any part of her body, but I've decided to humour her for the time being. She stops crying in the evenings if I brush her hair.

'Mmm!' she says as the bristles tug down. Her hair is thick and brown, with wiry strands of grey.

I lift the brush towards her head in preparation for the next stroke. All the hair rises up in waves of static, following my hands and making me laugh to myself. She sits upright in her chair. She doesn't mind how firmly I wrench down on the strands.

But when I stare at her hair for too long, I start to feel really sick at the thick mass of fibre. It looks alive at the roots, clinging to her white scalp like millions of tiny claws. And when I tug too hard on the brush, strands of hair snap off in my hands. Then I hear a roaring noise in my head, and large spots roll across my eyes.

'Mmm!' she says in anticipation if I pause for too long, so I have to continue.

With each stroke, she drifts farther away from me. I stare blankly at her shoulders and continue to brush.

Sat 20th August

'Shoo! Haven't you got homes to go to? Don't touch that box!' The really fat woman swats us like bluebottles and tries to usher us out, but every time she manages to bat one child out of the door, another slips past and flies erratically along the corridor to explore the living quarters at the back of the shop.

The whole place is alive with children, rushing about. They're running, upstairs and down, shouting, banging doors, looking for hidden treasure in all the dusty nooks and crannies. The thing is, word leaks out whenever people move house in the village and all the local children run over to scamper through

the empty buildings. But we are more excited than usual this time because the village shop has been vacant for years.

The fat woman lumbers around, pregnant belly as tight as an elephant's. Sweat gathers on her freckly forehead in translucent beads. She keeps grabbing the hand of a toddler, shouting, 'Stop it, Sammy!' when he tries to join the other children's games.

'Don't lift anything heavy,' *he* warns when he sees her fidgeting with the corners of boxes.

'Can't you get these kids out of here?' she complains, massaging the small of her back. 'They're getting in the way.'

She adjusts her ponytail. Her hair looks like a rusty Brillo Pad and her ankles are swollen.

'I doubt it,' *he* says, that man, and his laugh is so infectious that I can't help smiling too, and looking at my shoes.

I'm not running around any more because I can't stop staring at the man. He's tall and thin with bright blue eyes, hair the colour of straw and a turned-up nose. He skips through the empty spaces, light as air, calling to the removal men with a voice like a flute. It's as if somebody has taken a boy my age and stretched him into grownup size, but far nicer.

Seeing me standing quietly by the empty shelves watching him, he walks over and ruffles my hair. I feel a tugging sensation inside my stomach.

'Good afternoon. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, mademoiselle,' he says, bowing low before me and flourishing an invisible hat.

'The honour is all mine,' I say, curtsying, and he looks at me in great surprise. Maggie Tulliver would be okay in this situation. I think of her. Clearly he's impressed by me. I can tell by the way he addresses me next.

'And what might be the name of this uncommonly delectable and cultured young lady?'

'You may address me as Miss Elizabeth Osborne. I'm thirteen,' I inform him. Like a sprinkle of water, my words tickle him all over.

'Well, Miss Osborne the Thirteenth, my name is Lord Phillips the Younger, if you would care to write it on your card for the next dance.'

'Peter!' the Elephant Woman snaps. 'Stop messing about!'

Trunks, boxes and dustbin sacks sprout in every corner. The Elephant Woman waves her hands around, issuing instructions.

The removal lorry blocks the road, casting a black shadow through the window.

My sister appears in the corridor behind the counter, clutching a handful of rusty keys, tripping on the lino as she dives into the shop.

‘Whoops!’ The man catches her arm. ‘What have you got there?’

Helen looks at him, rolling her little-girl eyes, and says in her most irritating, wheedling voice, ‘I found these upstairs.’

‘Well, you can keep them if you like,’ the man says, peering at her hands in amusement. ‘What’s your name?’

‘She’s called the Vilest Creature in the Village,’ I say.

This causes two unwelcome responses in the man. First, he staggers back in alarm. Second, he takes a Milky Way out of a box, leans forward, touches my sister’s shoulder with it like a magic wand, and tells her that it contains a secret potion to protect her from big sisters. I know now I must never introduce her as Whore, because this lovely man will definitely stop liking me if I use dirty words like that.

He winks at me, and disappears in a flash through the door.

Tues 30th August

My sister has been wandering out of the house on her own. Sometimes she returns clutching an open bag of Monster Munch, or a packet of Opal Fruits. I reckon she’s visiting a poor old lady in the village in order to plunder her reserves of snacks, carefully collected over the last few months to give to her grandchildren at Christmas. Old people plan ahead like that. Anyway, I’m going to discover where my sister goes and protect this old lady from further child abuse from Helen.

For now, I tell my sister that I’ve finished the delicious chocolate caramel doughnut Rebecca bought us as a reward for keeping out of her way this week, and I watch as my sister gobbles up her doughnut to catch up with me. She looks

a bit sick at the end of her feast, but you can see she's pleased that we're equal again.

'Not really,' I say, and show her the pristine doughnut which I've been holding in a pincer grip behind my back. Voila! I haven't taken a single bite out of it yet.

Helen's face is completely blank.

I am always several steps ahead of her. Partly this is a consequence of our age difference, but mostly it's because Helen is flawed and impaired and mentally retarded. However hard she tries, she'll never catch up with me. Every time she changes her strategy or tries to outwit me, I catch up with her and pin her down like a Cabbage White butterfly.

Wed 31st August

Helen must have told somebody outside about my nickname for her, and somebody must have laughed and told her what it really means, because this evening she tells me categorically that I mustn't call her Whore any more. She doesn't like that name. So now, whenever she walks past me in the corridor, fingers picking at her hair, I whisper 'Whore' under my breath. My voice sounds like the sigh of a ghost. It's filled with inconsolable H's. I think I'll shorten her nickname to a simple 'H' and use it publicly when addressing her. Other people will think this is my affectionate abbreviation of Helen, but she'll know what the letter really stands for. She'll know what it really means.

II. September

Sat 3rd September

I dawdle by the fridge in Finefare and ask if we can buy some processed cheese. 'Don't insult cheese,' Rebecca replies.

She also refuses to buy any type of crisps because she once worked out what a pound of potatoes would cost if you multiplied the weight and price of a packet of crisps.

My mother has no imagination. She's incapable of trying new things. She really needs to relax a lot. She needs to learn to take risks.

Fri 9th September

I am invisible. Invincible. I creep into the cloakroom to pilfer things from people's bags. The subtle odours of people's homes mingle with the smell of their plimsolls. I open the zips, strings, buttons and press-studs. All this week I've been sneaking in at break-times to pull out fountain pens, scented felt-tipped pens, glitter pens, pencils in rainbow colours. I store the hoard in my own gym bag, which I made out of denim in our Domestic Science class last year. It hangs on my peg with my Blue Peter badge pinned to the front. It feels good to deprive people of their treasures.

Sat 10th September

Today, when we run back to Katie Nelson's house and tell Mrs Nelson how the ambulance men hurried into the shop, strapped an oxygen mask over Mrs Phillips's mouth, bundled her into the back and sped off while she cried and screamed and clutched her stomach, Mrs Nelson remarks that it's unusual these days for pregnant women to be taken to hospital like that. What women are supposed to do is pack a middle-sized holdall bag with essential products and their husbands take them to hospital by car.

'She must be mad. Once was enough for me,' Mrs Nelson wraps her arms around her middle, frowns, hunches over, grimaces. She's so funny when she

says this. 'It was like being ripped open down there. "That's it! No more babies," that's what I told him when we got home.'

'But, when an ambulance comes, does it mean something has gone wrong?' I try very hard not to sound too hopeful.

Until today, the only time I've seen an ambulance close-up was when the old man with the zimmer-frame tripped over his doorstep at number thirty-two. All his carrier bags burst on the road as he fell, and he landed on top of the glass bottles. The woman who lives next-door to him phoned for an ambulance and placed the old man on his side, head propped on a coat. Then she said he was a filthy drunk who encouraged rats into the house.

The road stank of beer and his front-door was wide open. We all came out to watch.

Me, Helen and Katie Nelson stared at his body on the road, feeling strange to be towering over a grownup, especially a man, and we peered into his house. But we couldn't see any rats, only stacks of yellowed newspapers on the stairs and a pile of unopened letters on the floor.

'When he gets better, maybe we can offer to open his letters and read them out to him, in case they're important,' Katie Nelson suggested. Katie goes to my school. She's in the year below me. I'm not sure if I like her yet. First of all, she's got to pass some tests.

Helen nodded. 'Maybe he can't read.'

When the ambulance arrived, the old man was awake again, rolling around, making crunching noises in the glass. I felt sorry for him. He'd made it all the way down to the pub with his empty bottles and all the way back with the full new ones, then tumbled at the last hurdle, his very own doorstep.

Clearly he had forgotten the important Rule about concentrating on the details.

Anyway, when they took Mrs Phillips off in an ambulance today, *he* stood in the doorway of the shop, hands dangling by his side, frowning. In-between screams of pain and gulps from the oxygen mask, Mrs Phillips kept shouting instructions to him about Sammy and the shop. But he just stood there looking like a kid who's got lost in the supermarket. When the ambulance drove off, he hung his head, crept back into the shop and turned the 'open' sign to 'closed.' He didn't even say hello to me.

Sun 11th September

I clatter over the threshold. Mr Phillips appears from the corridor, chewing something. He swallows melodramatically when he sees me and breaks into applause. Well, he's clearly feeling a lot better than yesterday.

'Look who we have here.' Then he screws up his eyes comically and looks around the shop. 'Where's little Miss Messy today?'

'Helen? She's round at Katie Nelson's,' I explain. His behaviour is a bit suspicious, like my dad just before a big row with Rebecca. 'And you're right, she is messy. You should see her bedroom. It stinks! I'm surprised there aren't any rats in there.'

Mr Phillips's blue eyes twinkle. His hair is glossy and fair. He reminds me of the Handsome Prince in that story Dad used to read me when I couldn't get to sleep.

An overweight black-and-white cat tries to sneak into the shop through the connecting door. Mr Phillips shoos it back. I long to explore the house behind the shop to see what things he's put on the shelves and in the corners. I imagine how he's transformed the dusty corridors and rooms, hanging crystal chandeliers to channel beams of light in unexpected directions, and how he's hung mirrored globes from the ceilings to capture the sparkle in his eyes a million times over.

My pound coin presses into my palm. I've managed to shake off my sister and sneak up to the shop for some special time alone with Mr Phillips, just *him* and me.

'And what can I do you for, young lady?' he asks, making me laugh at the way he mixes up the words to give them new meanings.

His eyes are full of laughter and jokes.

When Mrs Phillips is serving in the shop, the toddler burbles in the background and the air reeks of cabbage. But today the air smells of lavender and fresh laundry.

I hand him my shopping list.

‘Would you take a look at this!’ he exclaims, whistling, bringing my list up close to his face, slowly going cross-eyed until his pupils almost touch his nose.

I try hard not to laugh.

Using my superfine calligraphy nib, I’ve listed each item in order of priority, with the price per ounce marked neatly beside it. I used one of my dad’s old shopping lists as a model.

Patiently, Mr Phillips measures and weighs half an ounce of lemon sherbets, followed by half an ounce of Mr Humbug’s rhubarb-and-custards. After twisting the corners of each paper bag, he bends forward so that his nose almost touches the counter and places a tiny tick beside each item on my list using the pencil that peeps out of his hair behind his ear.

When he comes to my order for chocolate buttons, he says he needs assistance to measure such a small amount, because I only want a quarter of an ounce. He asks if I would kindly step behind the counter to help him. He raises the hatch like a drawbridge, and I’m through to the cramped space behind. He stands on my right and holds my elbow steady as I dip the scoop into the jar, lean towards the scales, and solemnly drop one, two, three chocolate buttons into the open mouth of the bag.

His hand is really warm. My skin prickles and burns all along the right-hand side of my body.

Suddenly he levers my arm so that all the disks scatter everywhere, and says, ‘Whoops!’

I scream. I don’t like surprises. But I feel pleased about the sweets.

Mr Phillips puts his finger on his lips and I do the same. Together we promise not to tell anybody about the incident with the chocolate buttons. From this experience I have learnt a useful Rule for next time: always put your favourite thing last on a shopping list, not first, just in case.

I hand my coin to him and give him my sweetest smile as I take my change and reach out for the paper bags. He guides me back through the hatch into the familiar space of the shop, and thanks me for helping an old man whose wife is in hospital.

I love Mr Phillips, but I haven’t told him yet.

I stand on the lino and inform him that from now on I’ll be helping in the shop.

Mr Phillips is adamant that he doesn't need any assistance, but I know he's only being polite.

I insist. I rearrange the Delmonte fruit tins so that the colour schemes match properly. It's hardly surprising that the shop is such a mess, because all Mr Phillips does is scuff around behind the counter and fidget with his pencil.

After about half an hour, Mr and Mrs Nelson appear in the door, blocking the entrance and spoiling the romantic atmosphere I've created.

'Have you seen our little girl?' Mrs Nelson asks. She looks around the empty shop. 'Katie! Where are you? She came up here to buy crisps with your sister, Lizzie. We haven't seen them for over an hour.'

It's obvious that Katie and my sister aren't here, but Mrs Nelson comes into the shop anyway, disturbing the peace.

Mr Nelson stands on the 'Welcome' mat in the doorway. 'Got this place on the cheap, did you?' he asks, inserting his forefinger into the doorframe and wriggling it around.

'We'll soon get the business up and running,' Mr Phillips says. His voice sounds completely different when he talks to grownups. From this I can tell he's a shy person, just like me.

To my utter amazement, Katie Nelson suddenly bursts through the connecting door behind the shop counter, shrieking with laughter. She ducks under the wooden hatch and runs up to her parents excitedly, waving a dusty mousetrap. 'We've been finding things in the old cellar.'

Why didn't Mr Phillips say that she was here?

The white fur collar on her jacket is covered with cobwebs. Her pink rah-rah skirt is smeared with streaks of dirt. My sister bursts out of the corridor behind her and rushes into the shop with equal vigour, followed by the cat.

'Look at the state of you both!' Mrs Nelson screams. She turns to Mr Phillips and rolls her eyes. 'I hope they haven't been annoying you, Mr Phillips. And I hope you know what you're letting yourself in for, having another one. One's bad enough. How is your wife? Caesarean, was it? Home soon?'

'Come here, princess,' Mr Nelson says, reaching out his arms to Katie. 'We've been looking for you.'

Mrs Nelson eyes the messy stack of boxes in the corner, and pats the tight curls in her perm. 'Shopkeepers before, were you?'

‘We’re starting a new business. Change of scene.’

‘Where were you living before?’ Mrs Nelson asks. ‘In town?’

‘Quite a way away,’ Mr Phillips says, and waves his hand vaguely towards the creek.

‘We’re at number sixteen. We only moved in ourselves a few months ago. Wanted to get out of town. Nice safe environment for our little girl...’ She glances briefly at the strings of edible necklaces on display in Mr Phillips’s cabinet. ‘Let me know if we can be of any help.’

‘Thanks for the offer.’

I glower at Helen and Katie. What I can’t work out is precisely how these girls got in when I’ve been here all along. Perhaps they crept through the back door without *him* knowing, and now he’s too polite to mention it to Mr and Mrs Nelson?

‘What did you do before?’

‘Actually, I was made redundant. Fresh start.’

Mr Nelson shakes his head. He pauses, twitches his moustache, and then says vehemently, ‘Bloody unions!’

‘But what *was* it you did before?’ Mrs Nelson asks.

‘I really must phone my wife.’ Mr Phillips fidgets with the paper bags and looks at the door. ‘Nice to meet you both. I hope you’ll make the most of having a shop in the village again. Bye-bye girls. Off you go as well, young Elizabeth.’

Mon 12th September

On the way home from swimming lessons in town, our car gets stuck behind a convoy of slaughterhouse trucks which trundle towards the bone factory with their loads. Slimy bones protrude from the tarpaulins strapped over the skips. When the truck in front of us hits a pothole, some bones bounce out and roll to the side of the road.

I stare at the threads of red stuff hanging off the bones on the verge.

As soon as she sees the convoy, Helen clamps her eyes closed and clutches her skinny knees. ‘Tell me when they’ve gone,’ she whimpers.

I know that the bones she imagines behind her tightly closed eyelids are far worse than the ones I can see in the truck.

‘It’s always better to keep your eyes open if you want to see what’s really going on,’ I tell her. ‘Otherwise your imagination starts to play tricks, and that only makes things worse. You should know that by now.’

‘I don’t want to see it.’

‘For God’s sake, shut up both of you,’ Rebecca shouts, jamming her foot on the brake and pulling into the verge. ‘Stop being so neurotic!’

I don’t know why she always tries to blame me as well as Helen. I’m not neurotic. I’m totally different from my sister.

Rebecca allows the convoy to move off ahead, onto the flat road on the other side of the creek.

When we get back to number eleven, the first thing we do is run around the house closing the windows and slamming the doors, plugging any gaps leading to the outside world.

Above the gentle, melodic rattle of rigging on the creek, the air fills with the clatter of bones as they’re tipped into the factory yard. They sound clean and dry, like pencils dropping on a classroom floor.

If it’s a school morning when a convoy of trucks arrives, we always rush to get in the car and leave the house before the stench reaches the village. If it’s half-term or the school holidays or a Saturday, we have to stay sealed indoors. Sometimes Helen and I take our dad’s old pestle and mortar, which he used to grind some white powder, and we mix butter and sugar together to make a delicious creamy snack. My sister is allowed to lick the pestle while I have the mortar. But on Bone Days the mixture always tastes sour because the backs of our throats are coated with the smell.

Rebecca refuses to cook proper meals on Bone Days. She shuts herself in the study and listens to Bach. She says the stench from the factory destroys the flavour of anything she prepares for us. I think she’s just using the factory as an excuse, though, because Rebecca believes that cooking is a waste of time: you spend hours making something, and what happens? People eat it in just a few seconds.

Today, Helen creeps into her bedroom with a bucket from under the sink, retching.

I make sandwiches which I carry into the living-room and eat in front of *John Craven's Newsround*. *Scooby-Doo* comes on. I start to feel bored.

Out of pity I decide to play a game with my sister to take her mind off the bones. My favourite indoor game is called Pulse Beat. I made it up when I was small. You have to mix equal handfuls of split peas with dry kidney beans on two dinner plates, and then you compete with each other to see how quickly you can separate them out again.

Helen squeals with excitement when I suggest we play this game, and she demands repeat matches until I refuse to play any more.

My favourite game is hide-and-seek.

Slowly, the bone-smell drifts over the creek and seeps into the house.

Tues 13th September

Rebecca wants me to keep an eye on my sister in the two-hour period between our arrival home from school and her return from the campus because Mrs Nelson phoned up last night to complain that Helen was leading Katie astray in the village. Now my sister is under instructions to come straight home from the village school and wait for me at number eleven until I arrive back from my school in town.

This arrangement suits me because although, legally speaking, I will not be old enough to babysit for another seventy-eight days, Rebecca has agreed to pay my rate of seventy-five pence per hour. She complained bitterly and attempted to negotiate with me, saying that I shouldn't charge a fee to my own mother for the care of my sister, but I held firm and refused to alter my price. I always win in the end.

I'm saving up for a microscope so that I can examine things in detail. In June, Helen caught some tadpoles in a jar. Using her pipette, I sucked each one up by the tail. As each tiny body got stuck in the nozzle, a strange dark liquid swirled out of its tail. I want to be able to see what's really going on.

Thurs 15th September

That girl with bright white hair, white eyelashes and a pale freckly face approaches our English teacher's table.

'I'm learning the violin,' she tells our teacher proudly, in a voice loud enough for all of us to hear. She explains that she's approaching the first exam. She calls it the 'Royal Academy of Music Examination,' and says that her violin teacher expects her to get a distinction.

Our teacher's admiration for this girl radiates through the whole classroom; it reaches out to where I sit and tweaks sharply at my ears. I can't let this Pale Girl take the upper hand with our new teacher. When you move into a new year-group at school, it is very important to establish your status and credentials early on with all the teachers.

Our task in class today is to write an essay entitled 'My Summer Holiday.' How boring! Year after year we have to write on the same topic at the start of term. Teachers have no imaginations. I make use of the opportunity to describe how, during the holidays, my violin teacher got me to audition for the Royal Academy of Music. I'm so gifted that I exceed their standards and they want to offer me a scholarship.

I pause, wondering why I wouldn't have mentioned this to anybody, then write that I haven't confided in anybody because, given what happened to my dad, my mother prefers me to stay in the village, sheltered by anonymity, avoiding the limelights of London.

As I try to think what to write next, I look around the classroom. People's lips move in quiet concentration as they attempt to spell the names of their holiday resorts.

Why can't I go to London? I start to panic, struggling to think what might have happened to my dad. I can't cross out what I've written, and we're not allowed to tear the pages out of the exercise book. We've only got ten minutes left. What would stop me from being able to accept my scholarship at the Royal Academy?

At the start of the summer, I write, an IRA letter-bomb to my dad was intercepted. Naturally, after that my mother has been nervous about taking me to London. We like to keep quiet about my father's important political position. We even have to pretend that he doesn't live with us any more in order to shelter

him. I would be grateful if school didn't publicise the fact or tell my mother that I've mentioned it here. Nobody is safe in these dangerous times. Our house in particular is under threat from the IRA. All the letters that come through our front door are screened by officials.

I hand in my exercise book.

For the rest of the morning I worry in case our teacher doesn't believe it.

After school, I seek her out in the staff room and tell her shyly that I'm worried about my essay because it contains some disturbing information and disclosures. I sketch the bare bones of my story. Her frown deepens, and she looks at me in amazement. But when she reaches out a hand and pats my arm, I know that I've defeated that Pale Girl's story.

Sat 17th September

'But I want to help while she's away.' I fidget with the crooked tower of baskets by the door, trying to make each one fit neatly into its neighbour.

He's standing opposite me, stacking a shelf with tins of spam.

'That's a very kind offer, but we're all ship-shape here. There's not a lot to do apart from sing to myself and practise my ballroom dancing!' He jiggles his hips provocatively and grins at me.

'You don't have to pay me. I'd *like* to do it.'

The tinned vegetables and packet soups are in complete disarray. Obviously, Mr Phillips is not capable of seeing how things look to the outside world. He needs me because I have an eye for detail, and that includes the way I'll look after him when we get married in the end.

'She's only been gone a couple of days, Lizzie, and there hasn't exactly been a mad rush of people fighting over the last loaf of bread. People in this village,' he widens his eyes, leans forward, and puts a finger to his lips, 'haven't yet realised that a massive slick of volcanic lava is rolling down the creek to hit the village, so you'd better not tell them if you want to consume this last packet of chocolate digestives.' The packet appears in his hand, conjured out of thin air.

I try not to laugh. I want him to see how serious I am about my proposition. 'But she might be gone for ages. I can clean the shop while she's

away. I like cleaning. Or the house? I'm a very clean person at home. You should see my room. You don't have to pay me.'

He laughs and looks at me fondly. 'And what would people say to that? Not only am I employing an underage worker, but I'm not even paying her. They'd have my guts for garters. You run along now, Lizzie. You've got better things to do than hang around here chatting to an old man.'

Reluctantly, dreading the fact that he might say yes, but knowing I have nothing else to offer, I play the last card in my solitaire pack. 'Or maybe,' I say, 'if you need, I can look after Samuel while you work through here?'

'Irene's parents are lending a hand with things like that. In fact, they've got Sammy at the moment.' He pauses. 'But you're nearly fourteen, is that right?'

I nod.

'I tell you what, after your birthday, we might take you up on that offer. We're looking for a local babysitter, a *paid* one.'

Before he has time to expand on his idea, an old woman comes into the shop and I have to move out of the way. Perhaps I should let Mr Phillips mull over my various suggestions and come back tomorrow?

'I'll be off now,' I say. 'See you soon.'

He raises his elegant hand in a seafarer's salute and immediately turns his attention to the old woman.

Mon 19th September

'I'm going to play with Katie,' Helen calls, and pulls the door closed behind her.

I look out of my bedroom window.

My sister walks straight past Katie Nelson's front door, head bowed down in the half-light as if she doesn't want anybody to see her. I press my nose against the cold glass. Her skinny form scuttles up the road without a coat in the drizzle.

Normally I don't really bother to keep track of my sister, so long as she comes home before Rebecca gets in from work so that I can claim my fee. Today, however, I had a really bad time at school because three girls in my class accused me of stealing glitter pens and Magic Markers from their bags in the cloakroom.

They saw me using *similar* pens to their missing ones, and jumped to conclusions.

I can't sit still inside the house. Rebecca is at an evening seminar and there's nothing to divert my attention at number eleven. I need to take my mind off tomorrow. I decide to follow my sister and find out who she's visiting.

It takes a few minutes to locate my mother's old macintosh underneath the layers of coats hanging in the hall. At this time of year I hardly ever go outside in the evenings, especially if it's raining. I prefer to sit with my back pressed against the radiator, soaking up the heat. My project this autumn is to perfect my calligraphy so that I can write professional labels for each of the specimens in my bottle collection. After that, I'm going to write a catalogue for all the books in my personal library. So far, I can do about three or four different styles, but I need to practise them every night, and learn some new ones so that everything I write will look beautiful.

By the time I get outside, Helen is nowhere to be seen.

I hunch my shoulders against the rain and walk up the road, past Katie Nelson's house and past the village shop, which has closed for the night.

People's silhouettes move around behind curtains.

Looking left and right, I continue up the road until I reach the church and peep over the flint wall. Still there's no sign of Helen. Ancient gravestones covered in lichen puncture the evening light. Half-hopefully, I wonder if my sister has been kidnapped by a strange man, like the girl I heard about on *John Craven's Newsround*. We will bury Helen here with all the other dead children, and the rain will wash her blood into the soil, draining everything away. Tucked inside this same thought, however, is the notion that my dad might have reappeared and taken her off in his car, leaving me alone in this place with Rebecca.

Shivering and damp, I abandon my search, turn around and walk back towards number eleven.

A light is on in the village shop when I pass, sending shafts of gold through the blinds to shimmer on the tarmac. Figures move about inside.

I linger in the empty drive that runs along the side of the shop, but try to stay as far away as possible from the spooky passageway which leads from the drive to the house at the rear.

I have always wanted to be able to gaze at Mr Phillips without *him* looking back at me with those dancing eyes, but until now it's never occurred to me that I could easily peep through the shop window after dark. Whenever I think about how to look at him properly for a long time, without being spotted, I imagine him fast asleep in bed. Once I pictured him lying beautifully in a coffin, but that was too upsetting. In my daydream, Mrs Phillips is nowhere to be seen.

I inch forward to the window and almost fall against it when I see what's going on inside.

All the familiar tins, packets and jars are in their usual places in the shop, but they have lost their neutral, everyday appearance and taken on an artificial sheen. The apples and tomatoes in boxes look as if they have been made from colourful wax, and the sweets shine too brightly inside the plastic jars above the counter.

The hero and heroine of the show are real enough. It's obvious to me that these two have no idea they are visible to the outside world. They think they are hiding inside a sealed-off world.

I can't hear what they're saying through the glass, but my sister melts with open delight as Mr Phillips juggles three clementines, his mouth moving rapidly all the time. His eyes show intense concentration while, quick as lightning, his hands reach out, first left then right, grabbing potatoes from a sack to add to the airborne fruit. Strewn at their feet is a pile of fresh produce. Clearly my sister has made several attempts of her own to juggle under his instruction.

No matter how close I get to the window, they can't see me because of the brightness of the light inside. I am as invisible as the glass. Every time Helen tries to juggle, Mr Phillips stands there smiling down at her, occasionally correcting her posture by setting her elbows at the correct angle. She is, of course, a complete failure and drops things all the time.

When he stands behind her and rests his hands on her shoulders, my mouth fills with a bitter taste which I want to spit out at the corner of the shop. Instead, I swallow, turn away, and walk back down the road.

Without having a definite plan in mind, I ring the bell of Katie Nelson's house. The dog yaps inside. When Mr Nelson opens the door, I burst into loud, uncontrollable sobbing. I'm not pretending to cry. What I've seen has genuinely

upset me. I can't believe *he* invites her round, not me, and that he prefers her silly games to my intelligent conversation.

'Is Helen here?' I splutter. 'She's gone missing from home. I'm really worried! I'm meant to be looking after her, but she went off on her own. Do you know where she is?'

Katie Nelson hovers behind her dad, trying to smile at me in a friendly way. Katie's only in the first year at my school, so I generally tend to ignore her.

'Where's your mum?' Mr Nelson asks.

'She's at work. She won't be back till about half eight tonight.'

Mr Nelson exchanges a Funny Look with Mrs Nelson, who has appeared in the hall.

When I started my story, my vague aim was for them to call the Police and report my sister missing, then a search party would discover Helen at the shop and she'd be in Deep Trouble. She's still a minor in the eyes of the law, so she's clearly committing a criminal offence if she runs off like this. But as I stand on the doorstep facing the Nelsons, I start to worry about what I might have started. I don't want any trouble for *him*. If they find Helen with *him*, he might be implicated in her crime by association with her.

I shuffle from foot to foot. 'Maybe she's at home after all.'

'There she is!' Katie shouts, pointing over my shoulder.

Helen wanders down the road sucking a lollipop. She waves cheerfully at us.

'Where have you been?' Mrs Nelson shrieks. 'You *must* tell your sister exactly where you're going, especially at night. You never know who's out there.'

'I went to see my friend,' Helen says, and looks at me triumphantly. 'Did you think I said I was going to see Katie? Silly Lizzie!'

'What friend?' I demand.

'My friend up the road,' Helen replies enigmatically.

By the time our mother gets home, Helen is sitting happily in her bedroom. She's dry and warm, smiling, lips stained red from her lollipop. I, on the other hand, am wet to the bone and my teeth are chattering. My whole body is pressed against the radiator in my bedroom. Steam rises from my damp clothes. I smell like a dishcloth.

My heart hasn't stopped racing since I left the shop window, and however many times I go to the bathroom to spit in the basin, that bitter taste lingers in my mouth, coating my teeth. Outside, the wind moans through the rigging on the creek. I imagine the yachts bobbing about on the high tide, battered florescent buoys strapped to their railings.

Tues 20th September

At exactly six o'clock in the evening, the bell rings and I open the front door. A man my dad's height stands on the doorstep, wearing my dad's grey raincoat and his glasses. Rain splashes off his silver car parked on the road immediately outside our house.

'Dad!' I say, full of relief at his return after so many years, waiting for him to bend down and envelop me with his musky smell.

Instead, the man tucks his mouth into his beard, makes a crooked shape with his lips, and gazes at me with magnified eyes. The wind flaps at his coat and blows salt-marsh scents into the hall.

'I'm not your dad,' the man says in a sad voice that is and is not my father's.

I can't believe the way my eyes have deceived me.

He holds a shabby briefcase in front of my nose to illustrate his point. 'I've brought some documents for your mum to sign. She said she'd be here this evening. *Is she here? Mrs Osborne?*

Out on the creek, the wind whistles through the boatyard and rattles the rigging against the masts. A faint clatter fills the air further off, on the other side of the water.

Our mother emerges from her study. Her long brown hair and pale face appear through a fog of cigarette smoke. 'Hello! Come on in.'

He takes off his raincoat and tries to hang it on a peg, but there's no space, so he folds it over his arm as she ushers him down the corridor. They are swallowed up by the smoke and the room.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I stare out of my window and tug at my fingernails with my teeth. In spite of the rain, it's still light outside, and warm. I can hear a thrush singing a fruity song.

I want to seal up the door of number eleven for ever, so that no more strangers can come along to trick me.

After the strange man's visit to our house, Rebecca's sobbing begins again. We hear it coming out of her bedroom. She starts up like the engine of our old car, straining at first and failing. After several attempts, she begins again and ticks over steadily for the rest of the night.

Wed 21st September

The playing-card is behind her ear! I can't work out how he did it.

I creep forward, trying to stay hidden in the drive, and peer through the blinds just as he puts an arm around her shoulders and gives her a squeeze. Her shoulders bunch up happily. He ruffles her hair.

He holds the pack of cards in a fan shape. She chooses one and replaces it without showing him. Then he finds her card again: this time it's tucked in her sock.

The next card is hidden in the hem of her skirt.

'What are you doing? Peeping Tom! Go home! Stop spying through windows!' the old man with the zimmer frame bawls at me.

I spin around.

Bulging carrier-bags hang off the handles of his walking frame. I was concentrating so hard I didn't hear him approach, even though each of his creaky steps forward is accompanied by the clank and chime of empty bottles.

When it's windy weather, he rings at our door and asks for help because the walking frame is too unsteady to deliver him down the hill and through the door of the pub.

Without waiting to find out if they've heard anything inside the shop, I run home to number eleven and slam the door behind me.

The Art of Persuasion

Basic Rules & Method

1. First of all, relax your whole face, inside and out, especially your throat. This stops you sounding guilty when you are under cross-examination.

2. Make sure you adopt a reasonable tone of voice. Flat denial does not work.

3. With grownups, you have to include what *they* say in your story. If you repeat some of the words and phrases they use to you, they are more likely to think you are telling the truth.

4. Maintain eye contact, not all the time but about eighty-eight to ninety per cent of the time. You must *never* move your eyes to your right because this is a sure sign you are lying.

5. Provide lots of detail because grownups always believe detailed stories.

6. If you don't believe your own story, nobody else will. You must believe what you are saying.

Fri 23rd September

'Hello young ladies. Welcome to my humble premises,' he says solemnly, bowing like a butler. He pretends not to recognise us. 'And who do I have the honour of serving on this auspicious morning?'

Even though we don't understand a lot of his words, we giggle at the attention and shift about on the lino. Helen passes our mother's shopping list to him, eager to see if he will perform a new magic trick today to make the list disappear from her hands and reappear behind her ears or in a pocket of his jeans.

I clamp my hand around Helen's fingers and squeeze. 'I'm not going to tell you my name,' I reply to his question, 'but I'll tell you who she is. Today this girl will be called the Common or Garden Snail. We can only feed her lettuce leaves. Maybe a cabbage leaf, but nothing too salty.'

‘No I’m not called snail!’ she shrieks, right on cue, ‘I’m called Helen. Helen.’

She pronounces it ‘Heron,’ and the more we play the game, the more Mr Phillips laughs at her and smiles at me.

I know he really likes me. You can see it in his eyes.

He chuckles and says, ‘You’re not a snail, sweetie, but you do need to come out of your shell!’

I laugh loudly at this hilarious joke, but you can tell that my sister doesn’t understand it because she stays silent. He holds out Helen’s *Bunty* and my *Beano*, refusing to let go of the comics while we pull with all our might. When he unclamps his fingers, we both stagger backwards. It’s always the same. He doesn’t mind if we land in the shelves of Mother’s Pride or fall on the sacks of potatoes.

Afterwards Helen stands on the blue and white lino not knowing whether to laugh or cry, peeping up at him through her black curls.

‘Well now, Miss Osborne the Thirteenth,’ he says, leaning towards me over the wooden counter and preparing for his regular Friday-night speech. My toes start to tingle, and I start to blush. ‘Isn’t it about time a young lady like yourself gives up the *Beano* and starts to read proper magazines? How about *Jackie?* Or *My Guy?*’

‘No! I hate them! I’ll never buy them.’

It’s true. I hate those magazines. They’re disgusting. Katie Nelson, who is only eleven, showed me her copy of *My Guy* a couple of months ago when we caught the bus home from school together. On the problem page there was a letter from a girl who let her boyfriend lick her Private Parts. She’d come up in sore red patches and wanted to know what to do. Disgusting!

Mr Phillips gives us a handful of sweets to eat as we wander back home to number eleven.

Sat 24th September

I’m not willing to plunder my reserves of pocket-money to buy a proper card for Mrs Phillips but, on the other side of the new pound coin, I want *him* to see what

a caring and sympathetic person I am compared with my sister so that he will snap out of his misplaced favouritism for her.

As a compromise, I decide to make a card. I don't spend too much time on it. I simply fold a piece of cartridge paper into quarters and scrawl a rough picture of a flower on the front in felt-tipped pen. I write 'Get Well Soon---from Lizzie at Number Eleven' in big black capitals inside the card, but refuse to use my calligraphy nibs or nice Winsor and Newton inks. Before leaving, I take an envelope out of Rebecca's desk in the study, and scrawl 'Mrs Phillips' on the front.

I hear the terrible racket the moment I put my hand on the door handle of the shop. Mr Phillips is in no position to greet me in his usual way. He can't bow down and call me mademoiselle. He can't wink at me and pretend the chocolate digestives are out of stock before magically producing a packet from his sleeve. In fact, I can hardly see him through the crowds, and when I finally catch a glimpse of his face he doesn't even look in my direction.

The shop is full of people. Samuel runs between everybody's legs, roaring 'nee-naw nee-naw' and laughing raucously at some private joke.

I don't think any of this is remotely funny. I planned to have a quiet mousy chat with Mr Phillips while the cat was away, and give him the card to give her in hospital.

I push my way over to the shop counter and hand over my envelope. 'I've got a card for Mrs Phillips.'

'Thank you Lizzie,' he replies. 'That's very sweet of you.' He points to the corner of the shop where most people are gathered. 'Give it to her yourself if you can fight your way through that lot.'

Reluctantly, I approach the corner. Mrs Phillips is sitting in the folding chair he keeps for old people when they get tired, surrounded by a semi-circle of women from the village making bleating noises. I force my way through. In her arms is a bundle no bigger than a sliced loaf of Hovis. I stare at its red screwed-up face and gaping mouth.

I'm amazed at how quickly she seems to have recovered. When the ambulance took her away the other day, she acted as if she was dying. What an attention-seeker.

When she finally sees me, she says, 'Lizzie! Meet George!'

All the women bleat again.

I hold out the envelope.

‘Thanks! Just pop it in the basket over there with the other presents. Did you see the lovely little bunch of flowers your sister made for me?’

In amongst the boxes of chocolates and bunches of real flowers, I see Helen’s trademark gift: a bunch of tissue-paper flowers in reds, yellows and blues. I carefully place my card on top of the bunch and press down very firmly. Before leaving, I steal a packet of ballbearings from the rotating rack by the door.

Mon 26th September

I’ve been reading my sister’s diary again tonight. It’s my way of keeping an eye on her, especially after what I’ve seen recently through the shop window. I want to make sure she’s not keeping any secrets from me.

I’ve also been trying to keep a record of her movements. I know which floorboards creak when I tiptoe around number eleven tracking her. Doors throughout the house move imperceptibly as I inhale and exhale behind them. I am a shadow peeping through the cracks at my little sister, tracing her every movement inside and outside the house.

She mostly goes to see *him* after we’ve had dinner, and she spends *prolonged periods* in the shop, lasting up to one hour.

Tonight she’s been gone for ages. What’s worse, *he’s* also disappeared from the shop, leaving Mrs Phillips to serve behind the counter while their tiny baby cries in her arms. Its noise jars the air. When I walked in this evening, she was actually breastfeeding it in the shop like a farmyard animal.

I stole a tin of Delmonte apricots.

Helen is so pretentious. Instead of writing a proper diary, she writes her account of each day in the form of a poem or a made-up story with ‘she’ instead of ‘I.’ She also tries to make the diaries exciting by introducing plot, suspense and invention. Some of her entries are complete fabrications, like the time she claims she went to Howletts Zoo near Canterbury, or the time she says she sat and watched *Flashdance* twice in succession at the cinema, sitting in the dark

for four hours. Nobody's ever taken her to Howletts Zoo! The only time she's been to a zoo was when Dad took us to Port Lympne and we secretly fed Polos to the elephants. And I would have known if she saw *Flashdance* once, let alone twice.

Her diary is so large and home-made you can see it from her bedroom doorway in amongst all her plants and flowers. The black cover stands out against the paintwork on her mantelpiece. On the cover, she's written 'Number 1' in lumpy Tippex.

The pages bulge with mementos. In her diary my sister keeps unimportant things like bus tickets and sweet wrappers. She tries to make this rubbish look special by gluing it onto the page and drawing frames around it with her felt-tipped pens. She writes captions under each piece of litter: 'Helen's voyage into town' or 'Helen's luxurious lunch.' She can't spell these words correctly, of course. I don't know where she finds some of the things she sticks in, like the stub for a swimming pool with a wave machine. I expect she picks them up off the road or out of rubbish bins, or she gets them off Katie Nelson. She also includes pressed flowers and leaves from her pot plants, carefully sandwiched in-between blotting paper, with information about each one's growth and seasons.

Her little stories and poems are an embarrassment. They should be burnt. I flick through the diary.

I laugh out loud when I read an entry written back in July:

I have been very busy looking for caterpillars all summer. I found four but I could not find out the names of three of them. There was a quite light green one which I found when I was grasshopper tracking and it had tiny white dots down its sides. The other two were both the same or very similar but one was big (that one drowned in my tadpole water) and the other one was little. The fourth caterpillar I found I think was one of the hawks because you could see a horn thing at its rear end. Mummy found an Elephant Hawk Moth moth on the rose bush and a Common Butterfly butterfly. So we are doing quite well.

Moth-moths and butterfly-butterflies! What on earth does she think she's talking about?

Helen's writing has no style or grace. She would benefit from a calligraphy lesson or two from me, if I could be bothered to teach her. I might offer her a weekly handwriting tutorial in exchange for a percentage of her pocket money.

There's a strange poem she wrote last week. It makes no sense at all:

His voice. The wind. The mud.

Head under water.

Roll on back. Lap the water.

Hello, who's that?

Jump up, lick, sniff.

Don't pat my head. Heron?

Chase it chase it. Free.

This poem doesn't even rhyme like proper poems should.

Anyway, this is her False Diary.

Diaries are places where you keep secrets. We all know that. Since finding out about her and *him*, I've realised that she must have a Real Diary hidden somewhere, containing all the details of their secret games and meetings. I've spent a great deal of time and energy recently looking for the Real Diary. I know the one I've seen is the False Diary because she's deliberately left it out for me to find. You can tell she's written all these lies and pasted in all this rubbish in order to put me off the scent of what's really going on with *him*.

It's lucky I'm not stupid.

The Real Diary. That's what I'm looking for now, not this bulging home-made book which makes my eyes sore and my head ache with its strange poems and endless accounts of the progress of seedlings and tadpoles.

One thing has really shocked me about the False Diary. She's tucked Dad's letters in amongst all the rubbish. Each familiar A4 sheet is folded into three, following the original folds Dad made when he finished writing and put his last row of x's at the bottom. Each letter peeps out from the top of the diary. I'll read them another time. I doubt he's got much to say to her because she always sided with Rebecca in their arguments. I was the special one with my Dad. I would *never* put my letters from my Dad in the same place as bus tickets, sweet wrappers, stuff picked out of rubbish bins and mouldy leaves.

Tues 27th September

'Did you really steal all this?' The headmaster shakes his head and looks at me with disappointed eyes.

The treasure-trove in my gym bag has been discovered. It's all lined up on the headmaster's table. So many things have gone missing since the start of term that the teachers locked the building one lunchtime and carried out a full-scale search of all our desks and bags as well as the cloakrooms.

Tearfully, I explain my innocence. The real thief has cleverly put these objects in my bag to avoid her own discovery. I have been stitched up. I am being persecuted by certain classmates out of jealousy. It's not my fault I always come top in class. Certain people have poisoned the minds of others against me. I haven't committed any offence. Those Three Girls call me stuck-up. They push into me in queues and call me a thief.

The headmaster listens patiently, but he keeps shaking his head.

Now the whole school building is going to be locked at break-times, and nobody will be allowed inside, except to go to the toilet. This leaves me very vulnerable. Those Three Girls have been eyeing me ever since it became public knowledge that the stolen items were discovered in my gym bag. During afternoon break, they make loud, disgusting comments about sex when I walk past. They always move through the school looking for targets, and now I am their Number One Target. They have the same effect on people as washing-up liquid in a greasy frying pan. Wherever they go, a halo of space opens up all around them.

Since people's possessions started to go missing a few weeks ago, everybody has been carrying their bags around with them in the playground because they think their stuff will be stolen if they leave it inside the building. I don't care. I've been stalking first-years during morning breaks, making them give me their packed lunches in a swap. I call it a swap, even though I don't give them anything back. I enjoy sliced white bread with Heinz Sandwich Spread. Afterwards I like to eat a Penguin or a Mars Bar. I detest luncheon meat, but slices of ham are okay, so long as there's no mayonnaise or cucumber.

Wed 28th September

‘Peas! Hurry!’ Rebecca says, thrusting a five pound note in my face. I’ve been loitering in the kitchen doorway for the last fifteen minutes, stomach rumbling, watching her cook. ‘Quickly, darling, before the shop shuts.’

I don’t see why I should always have to do things when Rebecca suddenly remembers them, as if I’ve got nothing better to do with my time.

A saucepan of water boils enthusiastically on the hob, rattling its lid, waiting for the peas. Beside it, another pan full of baked beans heaves and bubbles, emitting muddy slaps.

Rebecca got home from work early today. She’s been whistling while she cooks.

‘Are we having peas *and* baked beans for tea?’ I ask in a sceptical tone. Meals certainly have taken a turn for the worse ever since Dad left the kitchen.

‘I wonder if I should put the toast on now, or wait for when you come back?’ Her voice trails off. Rebecca always has problems with planning and coordination. ‘Try to find Helen while you’re out!’ she calls as I open the front door. ‘Tell her tea’s ready.’

‘Isn’t she in her room?’ I can’t believe I’ve lost track of my sister again. She sneaks out like a cat. It’s impossible to keep up with her movements, especially when she rushes off on her bike. I hate bicycles! I tried to ride one during Cycling Proficiency lessons at primary school, but I couldn’t get the hang of it and failed the test. That’s the only exam I’ve ever failed.

Although I’d never reveal this to Rebecca, this evening’s task is actually perfectly acceptable to me because it gives me a chance to see my Mr Phillips. Although I’ve seen lots of him recently through the window, I haven’t actually been into the shop for four days.

As I walk up the road, all the dinner smells of the village combine in delicious clouds of flavours which hover around my nose. I pause outside Katie Nelson’s house and sniff slowly, pulling the succulent meaty bouquet down into my throat. A pool of saliva forms on my tongue. I balance the smell just over the pool, then let it drop with a splash, and swallow.

Just as I push the shop door open, I am positive that I see my sister's head plummet out of view behind the counter.

'Hi Lizzy.' Mr Phillips's voice sounds quite high-pitched. He stares straight at me without moving his eyes to the left or right. 'You're lucky you caught me. I was just about to close.'

'Did I catch you?' I ask in my Sherlock Holmes voice, leaning forward as I edge along the counter towards the hatch. I stare hard at the glass front of the counter, trying to see past the sugar necklaces on elastic threads and edible cigarettes into the grey-brown space beyond, at the back. I think I can see a dark shape huddled in a corner. It might be a coat.

Mr Phillips places both hands squarely over the hatch, and leans forward. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to just below his elbows. We're almost nose to nose, except that my nose is several inches lower down than his.

I am in a tricky situation, which I try, silently, to resolve. I can't accuse him of anything because, even if she is hiding down there, he will stop liking me if I flush her out of her dusty snughole. On the other hand, given that Rebecca has sent me out to find Helen as well as frozen peas, if my sister is located in the same room as the peas then I would like to know about it.

'What can I do you for?' Mr Phillips asks, trying to adopt his normal jovial manner, but keeping his hands planted firmly on the hatch.

Rather than confronting him in an obvious way, I decide to trip him up on an invisible wire using the subtlety of my natural intelligence.

'Two things please. First of all, we need frozen peas for tea.'

'*Oui* to the peas, mademoiselle. And the second thing?'

Putting on my playful voice, I say, 'I'll tell you the second thing when you've fetched the frozen peas.'

'They're in the deep freeze just behind you.' He sounds relaxed, now, and gestures to the freezer with a nod of his head.

'Would you mind fetching them for me, please? Frozen bags always stick to my hands.'

'Don't be silly! You'll be fine!'

I tilt my head to and fro, listening for the smallest disturbance in the air behind the counter, the squeak of a plimsoll sliding a fraction of an inch along

the lino, the knocking of a nervous heart under a woolly jumper. I feel like a blackbird searching for a worm.

‘Don’t mess around now, Lizzie. Chop-chop! I’m trying to close up.’

I try to keep my eye on the counter as I walk over to the deep freeze, but unfortunately I am obliged to turn my head away at the last minute. The freezer creaks open, sending shards of ice spinning across the lino.

‘It’s heavy. Can you hold the lid open while I try to find the small size?’

This comes out in my paying-customer voice.

Mr Phillips hurtles through the hatch like a dart from a blowpipe, grabs a packet out of the freezer, thrusts it into my chest, arrives back at the till, rings up the amount, and hands me my change with a beaming smile.

‘Now what was that second thing?’ he asks, sounding efficient and busy.

My strategy has failed. Clearly, Mr Phillips and I are equally matched.

This just goes to show how compatible we are.

I adopt a blunter style. ‘Have you seen my sister this evening? I bet she’s not far away from here.’

‘No. I haven’t seen her at all. Why do you ask?’

Wearily, I say, ‘Oh, nothing. She’s not at home and tea’s ready.’

‘I’ll tell her if I see her.’

‘Yes, tell her if you see her.’ I move away from *them*.

‘See you soon.’

As I close the door behind me, I hear a rustle and a clatter, and I spin around, expecting to catch sight of Helen. But all I see is *his* hand by the door. The green ‘open’ sign on the shop door turns into a fierce red oblong saying ‘closed.’

I don’t know how she managed this feat, but Helen is standing in the kitchen when I get back to number eleven. She gives me a smug smile when I come in.

‘Honestly! How long does it take to get peas?’ Holding a wooden spoon like a chisel, our mother chips at the baked beans in the pan.

‘I haven’t been that long.’ I scrutinise my sister’s knees and shins for signs of shopfluff. ‘Where have you been? I was looking for you.’

‘In my room.’ Her voice lilts upwards at the end, which is one of the signs that a person is lying.

The peas are ready almost immediately. Rebecca drains them. She stands at the sink to serve the food. She had to cook the entire contents of the packet because we haven't got a freezer.

'*Voila!*' Down come the plates in front of us.

'This looks good,' Helen says sarcastically. She lifts a forkful of food, and peas roll over the table. Suddenly she starts to giggle.

I look at my plate of thick baked beans and crunchy peas. I can't see what there is to laugh about this evening. My sister, however, can't stop laughing. Every time she manages to get peas in her mouth, she spits them out with explosive guffaws. She howls especially loudly when she looks at me. I can't see what is funny about me. Finally, she is reduced to hiccupping and laughing at the same time.

Bemused, our mother simply sits there and smiles.

Thurs 29th September

The food Rebecca makes is disgusting. She doesn't bother at all. Dad did all the catering at number eleven. Apart from that one time with the tinned tomatoes, he cooked amazing meals, especially on Polite Party nights, when he made plates of special treats: mouth-watering cheese straws, miniature dropped scones, slices of bread as thin as tracing paper, fruit tartlets that glistened on white doilies. He used a special scoop to make curls of butter that looked like cockles which he heaped in a miniature silver bowl. Even though he knew there were four of us around the table, he always placed five items on each plate to test our politeness and make us learn how to share.

As he polished each plate and pushed our frayed napkins into the wooden rings, I would throb with pleasure, tracking every small movement and gesture with my eyes.

Rebecca always told him to stop showing off and get on with serving tea.

He said that Helen and I were special guests, young ladies who were paying a surprise visit to number eleven from the upper echelons of English society. We'd brought our grumpy old nanny along with us, and she could sit with us at the table, too, but only if she would stop making comments.

Fri 30th September

All their eyes are the same, beady and deep-set under fluffy grey brows. They observe me from the walls. Nobody ever smiles on Rebecca's side of the family. They hang in their frames all around the study with pursed puritanical faces, watching me.

Rebecca's desk is covered with tatty books of poetry and loose sheets of paper. It's extremely untidy compared to the table in my room. I take after my dad, neat and well-ordered with a strong sense of discipline, whereas Rebecca's work surfaces are littered with notes.

I pick up a couple of pages and examine them. Each sheet is covered with words inside circles. Arrows point in all directions to more words inside circles. I look at the other sheets on the desk. They all have the same patterns of circles and arrows. One page bears the word 'structure' in huge letters inside a circle, with four black arrows pointing away from it like the sails on a windmill. The page labelled 'synopsis' looks like a map in secret code, with hundreds of words inside circles, linked by a labyrinth of lines. Two sheets are different from the rest: 'chapter plan' and 'proposal.' These have hardly any words inside circles, and no arrows at all.

I flick through page after page of notes. There's no proper writing. Nothing resembles the essays I write at school. On numerous pages all the words have been scored out fiercely with black marker pen.

I start to open desk drawers and rummage through the contents. Papers bounce up enthusiastically from each drawer as if they are relieved to sniff sunlight and air, even though the atmosphere in here is thick with the smell of stale cigarettes. Every sheet of paper I find is filled with diagrams like the ones on her desk. Most of them have been scrubbed out with black marker pen.

I am looking for Helen's Real Diary. I know now that my sister doesn't keep it in her bedroom because I have searched every last corner and crevice of her space. Nor does she keep it in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the cupboard under the stairs, in the shed, in the cupboard under the sink, in the living-room, or in our mother's bedroom. For a moment, I even wondered if she'd hidden it in

my own bedroom. I've read *The Prince* by Machiavelli. I borrowed it from Rebecca. This morning I found myself lifting my pillows, blankets and the mattress, searching my own clothes drawers and calligraphy files to see if she'd tried to outwit me with this Machiavellian manoeuvre.

The study is the last place left for me to look.

Inside one of the desk drawers I see a tattered, blackened book of poetry. It falls open on a poem called 'Rural Rhymes.' I try to read it. A shepherdess sings 'lurah-leigh, lurah-la' to a shepherd. 'Chimes' is made to rhyme with 'lines.'

'What are you doing in here?'

I spin around. My sister's standing in the doorway.

'None of your business. Go away!'

'We're not allowed in here.' Helen eyes *Collected Works*. 'She paid fifty pounds for that book.'

I carefully replace *Collected Works* in the desk drawer.

My sister sidles over to the bookshelves in the far corner. She squats down, pulls titles off the shelf randomly, opens them up, and discards them in messy piles on the floor.

'Stop following me everywhere!' I hiss. 'Why can't you go away when I tell you to?'

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

Suddenly she squeals, puts a hand over her mouth and holds out a book. 'Look!'

I take the book reluctantly, not wanting her to think that I'm offering any encouragement, but when I look at it I nearly drop it on the floor. Cartoon Japanese men with gigantic Things and outstretched fingers aim for smiling women with chopsticks poking out of their hairbuns and wide open legs.

My sister laughs at the expression on my face. I throw the book towards her. 'Put it back. It's disgusting.'

'It's funny!' she says, turning more pages.

I can't believe she finds this book amusing. She examines each drawing in detail, rotating the book as if she's trying to identify exactly who owns which pair of legs and arms, revelling in the detail as if it's a proper comic book like the *Beano*.

I march over to where she's sitting, grab the Dirty Book out of her hands and stuff it back into the bookcase, trying not to look at the pictures as I do so. 'Get out. You're disturbing me.'

'But what are you looking for?' she asks, turning her head left and right as if she's looking for something too. 'I'll help. Do you want a book to read? This one's good.' She takes Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose* off the shelf and holds it out to me. 'It's really sad. The little girl only gets to see the man when the goose comes out of the sky...'

'I know what it's about. I read it ages ago.'

The longer she's in here with me, the more I realise that she can't possibly have hidden her Real Diary here. She throws no sneaky looks at particular spots in the room. She isn't making any effort to leave the scene of the crime. She gives me no other clues to its whereabouts.

Leaving her by the bookcase, I stalk out, defeat

III. October

Sat 1st October

‘Would you like a go of my new bike?’

Katie Nelson stands simpering on the doorstep of number eleven. She’s wearing a pink Wonder Woman t-shirt and spotless white jeans. She obviously thinks she has an entitlement to come round to our house and ring our doorbell uninvited. Diamante studs twinkle in her ears and she reeks of her mum’s Chanel No. 5.

I refuse to let her in, even though she’s trying to edge forward to stop me closing the door. Her toenails are painted pink. Little by little, each toe creeps over the threshold and arrives on our battered coconut doormat.

‘It’s my birthday today,’ she says eagerly. ‘I’m twelve.’

I wish she would act her age.

This morning, when I nipped up the road to have a quick chat to Mr Phillips when he opened the shop, I saw Katie Nelson’s dad carrying the bicycle into their house. Pink balloons bobbed around on the handlebars.

Mr Phillips told me he was a bit too busy to talk this morning.

Katie’s taken off the balloons and tied them round her wrists. They bob around in the afternoon breeze. The whole pink vision ripples and throbs in the doorway of number eleven.

‘Unfortunately I’m a bit too busy to talk to you at the moment,’ I tell her.

I regret having opened the door. I’ve been trying to write a letter to my dad all morning and I’ve got another headache. Sometimes I don’t know what I should write in my letters to him.

‘My dad says I’m not allowed to let *anybody* ride it, but I’ll let you have a go of it if you like. We can go down the other side of the creek. They won’t see us there. I haven’t had a go of it yet.’

My curiosity is faintly aroused. It’s not like Katie Nelson to be disobedient like this. She obviously wants to impress me because I’m older than her. She thinks she can win me over with bribes.

The birthday bicycle is cerise and lilac, with silver spokes that gleam in the sunshine and a white leather saddlebag. A large pink basket is strapped to the front, and a wing-mirror has been fixed to each handlebar. A tinkerbell sticker clings to the rear mudguard.

Katie's dog has stretched its lead as far away from our front door as possible. It pulls her arm backwards and dances around the front fence, fluffy and excited, sniffing, rolling the whites of its eyes at us. Somebody has wound a pink ribbon through its collar.

'I've got my birthday money here,' Katie says, pulling a pink purse out of a pink handbag and unfurling a crisp twenty pound note. 'I'm not allowed to fritter it. I've got to save it for something special. You coming out?'

'Yeah, okay then,' I say, eyeing the purse as it disappears back into the handbag.

She tries to pass me the dog's lead as I close the door, but I refuse because I hate little yappy dogs, so she locks the extending cord in place and winds the lead around one of the handlebars.

Carefully, Katie wheels her new possession down the hill past the pub, squeezing the brakes to stop it being pulled over. Whenever the dog catches a scent on the road, the bike jerks sideways.

We walk across the bridge and past the boatyard. The tide is out, leaving the hulls of the yachts exposed beside the jetties, keels plugged stiffly into the mud. Their pale, smooth bodies glisten in the sunshine.

The handbag sits in the front basket, zipped up.

We turn left onto the private road, and I look back across the creek, wondering what my sister is up to, regretting saying I'd come out with Katie Nelson. All the while as we walk, Katie tells me about her birthday presents, how many she got, how her mum made her a special breakfast this morning with hot chocolate in a rare bone china teacup that's worth hundreds of pounds.

A truck trundles past, drowning out Katie's voice. We stand aside and pull the dog into the verge. When the noise dies down and the exhaust fumes clear, Katie continues telling me how her mother brought the birthday presents over to the sofa, one by one. Her best present, the bicycle, was saved until last. Her dad gave it to her.

Another truck heaves past, engine roaring, spewing black exhaust in our faces. We stand in the tufty grass on the verge. The terrier yaps and strains at the lead. It would choke to death if it tried to swallow one of those hulky bones.

'You can have first go,' Katie says excitedly when the last truck has rumbled through the factory gates.

She unwinds the dog's lead and holds the bike towards me. I grasp the handlebars and clamber up. She doesn't know I can't ride bikes.

Even though she's nearly two years younger than me, Katie is a few inches taller. I wobble dangerously in the saddle, feeling too high off the ground. I can't put my feet down to steady myself. The front wheel swings left and right uncontrollably.

'I'll show you.' She almost pushes me off in her keenness to take possession of her precious birthday present.

'Get off! I can do it.' As I push her away, I fall off, and the bike clatters onto the road. The terrier starts barking uncontrollably. I'm sure the Nelsons will hear its terrible piercing noise across the creek, up the hill to the village.

'My dad'll kill me if you've damaged it.'

'Don't worry about *me*,' I say, rubbing my knee. I give her a dirty look, but at the same time, a pink rectangle in the basket of the bike catches my eye.

'I'm going home.' Katie's chin starts to pucker.

'Come on! Let's play *Dukes of Hazard*.' I say, grabbing the handbag out of the basket and taking hold of the dog. 'You'll be loads better than me. Bet you can ride it really well.'

She jumps into the saddle and sets off.

'Go on! Show me!' I shout. 'I bet you five pounds you're too scared to go round the corner.'

With the balloons still tied to her wrists, Katie pedals faster and faster until she is a small speck at top of the road. Her hair flies behind her like ribbons. She doesn't stop. Veering right, she speeds through the gates of the bone factory.

I hear the familiar clatter as a truck empties its load in a heap.

The terrier cocks its head and studies the spot where Katie disappeared. Its face is alert, ears like pert triangles of cloth.

The mudflats make soft popping noises.

I hurry up the road towards the factory, but the dog keeps halting, squatting firmly on its haunches, refusing to walk forwards. In the end I drag it along by its collar. It makes loud choking noises and looks back over its shoulder, whining to go home.

Just before we get to the factory gates, I stop beside a hawthorn bush and take Katie's purse out of her handbag. Then I throw the handbag into the grass under the bush. It forms a small lump of pink on the ground. Quickly, I push it deeper into the grass with my toe to make sure nobody will find it. I stuff the purse in my trouser pocket, trying to make it look flat against my leg, then I hurry towards the factory, hauling the dog by the neck.

At the 'No Entry' sign I pause and look inside. There's no sign of Katie.

A chainsaw buzzes somewhere in the village.

A swarm of starlings forms a brief, noisy cloud overhead.

The dog twitches its crusty nose. Suddenly, it cocks its ears and strains forwards. This time I'm the one to pull back reluctantly on the lead because two men with fluorescent jackets and bright yellow helmets are hurrying towards me.

Sun 2nd October

Helen's name has started to materialise on interior walls around number eleven. One moment she sees a slightly grubby magnolia surface. The next moment, just as soon as her back is turned, 'H-e-l-e-n' appears.

It first appeared on the wall of the upstairs landing in large indelible letters, stretched out between our bedrooms. Next it appeared tucked away by the skirting board in the hall downstairs in small wobbly black print. After that, it became more confident, rolling boldly and colourfully along the top of the radiator in the living room. And it sprang up wantonly, countless times, on the bathroom walls in a multitude of permanent colours. Worst of all, once it appeared just within arm's reach of the door of our mother's study.

Helen didn't see that one until it was too late. But it's always going to be too late for her.

Not once does she ask herself why my name doesn't appear on the walls. What makes this situation worse is that the name seems to be spelt out in her handwriting. There is no escape from the evidence of her own hand. Until now, she's been proud of her skill with the pencil and talks excitedly about her achievements at school. Countless times, she sits at the dinner table boasting

that hers is the neatest writing in class, that she will be the first person to do joined-up writing, that she will be the first person her teacher will allow to discard the pencil and use a biro. Blah, blah and etcetera, etcetera.

Pride is what you see before The Fall.

The first time she saw it, she actually ran to tell our mother in excitement while I watched from my bedroom doorway. But now she's learnt to creep around the house looking for these terrible signs.

Our mother's slippers aren't the same as those belonging to comic-book dads in the *Beano*. Theirs are always made from corduroy, tucked neatly beneath the settee before they go 'Thwack!' on the menace or the minx. Our mother's slippers have a strip of pink fur on each toe, decorated with beads and glitter. The pink fur streaks, up-down, up-down, in a nauseating way through the air, and the bead makes an arrow of light.

Watching Helen doubled over on Rebecca's knee, face already crumpling with tears, even before the first blow lands, I always feel my own emptiness pulling the inside of my stomach and tugging, connecting me to her. Up-down, up-down goes our mother's slipper.

At night my sister winds her alarm clock and lays herself down to sleep. The next morning, when she pads out of her bedroom into the house, she will be faced by H-e-l-e-n on a wall. Somewhere in the house, at some point during the day, she knows she will find it. Regular as clockwork.

Several days of ghostly writing have taken their toll on my sister. Today the headmistress of the village school, who lives up the road from us, dropped a note through the door to Rebecca asking if everything is okay and inviting Rebecca round for a cup of tea and a chat. We all know Helen will fail her eleven-plus next year. She is simply less intelligent than me.

Mon 3rd October

She scuttles across the lino like a mouse being chased by a cat. But I can tell she wants to be caught because she's shrieking with pleasure and laughter. I can hear her from where I'm standing, even though we're separated by a thick layer of glass.

He chases her with the purposeful stride of an adult who knows there's no need to run to catch up with the collapsible target. He delays catching her on purpose, increasing her excitement. I can see he's laughing, too. When he finally scoops her off the ground, hands like spades under her stomach, she kicks her legs and I can see her begging him not to tickle her again.

Tues 6th October

'She'll never find a husband now.' Mrs Nelson gulps a large mouthful of brandy. 'Not with that *thing* on her head.'

I maintain eye contact. I'm here to deliver a homemade get well card to Katie Nelson.

Mrs Nelson gasps and sighs like a fish when you flick it out of the bowl. She says she's been struggling to breathe all afternoon. Wondering if it's the right thing to do, I put my arm around her and give her a comforting squeeze.

Katie is upstairs in bed. She's had mild concussion since the accident on the other side of the creek, and she's covered in bruises. More than any other injury, however, Mrs Nelson is upset about the row of stitches across Katie's forehead, where she split her skin on the side of the pit.

The doctor said that Katie was very lucky. She fell into a bed of bones.

Mrs Nelson's bellyflesh moves around when she sobs. The soft crevices in her waist keep trapping my fingers, so I withdraw my arm from her middle and search for another place to put it.

'What were you two doing on that road, anyway?' Mr Nelson has just come home from work. He sends a brief, bitter look in my direction. 'Playing I-dare?'

'No, honestly! I never play that.'

'That puts an end to our Christmas safari. She's not allowed to travel for two months,' Mrs Nelson says, handing her glass to Mr Nelson. 'We'll lose the deposit. Pour me another drink, love. Another little Baileys, Lizzie?'

I suck my cheeks, savouring the aftertaste of the deliciously sweet, creamy drink. 'No, thanks. I've got to go home quite soon. The Baileys was lovely, though. I could just have a little one.'

I have explained everything to Mrs Nelson from start to finish. How, knowing the bike was a brand new special present, I tried to stop Katie from riding too fast until she'd tried and tested it properly. How she refused to listen to me because she was over-excited. She'd darted off.

Unlike some people I could mention, Mrs Nelson is beautiful when she cries. Her pupils turn shiny. She looks like a film star with diamonds in the corners of her eyes.

'That man who phoned us, do you think he took her bag?' She's been going on about the handbag for hours, in spite of all my efforts to divert her attention onto something else. 'You should've heard how he talked. Common as muck. "Ain't this, ain't that, ain't she a poor little girl." Bloody thief.'

'I'm sure he didn't take her bag,' I say in alarm. I'll need to retrieve that bag and dispose of it properly if Mrs Nelson is going to call the Police. Otherwise they'll find my fingerprints all over it.

I put my arm round her waist again. 'The bag's not important now. We just want Katie to get better.'

Mr Nelson gives me a Funny Look, but Mrs Nelson's eyes well up again. 'You go up and see her, pet, just for five minutes.'

Instructions to Copycats

Copycats are the lowest form of human life. They need to be trained and corrected. Read and sign the following:-

1. I am not allowed to like the same things as Lizzie.
2. I am not allowed to wear the same clothes as Lizzie or borrow her possessions without permission.
3. If I ever ask Rebecca to cut my hair in a bob, Lizzie will cut it into a new shape to make it different from hers.
4. I am not allowed to like the same people as Lizzie. That includes Katie Nelson who is more Lizzie's age than mine. If Katie Nelson phones or comes round, I am not allowed to start talking to her about anything without permission.

I will be compliant with these Rules forever.

Signed: Helen Osborne

In the presence of: Elizabeth Osborne (Legal Witness & Senior)

Sat 8th October

I pick up a packet of disposable Bic razors. When we get to the checkout and she spots what I've done, Rebecca hands my purchase back, telling me to replace it on the shelf. As she does so, she declares at top volume that once a girl starts to shave, all the soft downy fluff on her legs grows back as thick black hair, and there's no turning the clock back after that.

All my soft downy fluff stands on end. I can feel everybody's eyes examining my body as I take the packet of razors and walk back to the shelf.

Sun 9th October

'Over there.' Helen squats down by her bedroom window, holding the curtain back. She's pointing towards the bone factory, but her hand is trembling so much I can't work out what she wants me to look at.

I crouch among her plant pots, snapping stems and snagging my trousers on canes, and slowly raise my head to peep over the windowsill.

'Can you see anything?' she asks.

'No. Where?'

My eyes strain to see the shape she says is sitting in long shadows on the other side of the creek. Seagulls bob about on the trickle of water that oozes down the centre of the creek.

'Over there.' She tries to point again. 'In the grass.'

First of all, I see a red car parked on the side of the road, nose tucked into the bush where Katie lost her handbag. Then I see what she's pointing at: a small dark figure sitting on the far bank of the creek, its pale, round face gazing across the mudflats and marshes.

The man seems to be staring in our direction. This is not at all pleasant, so I move back from the window.

‘Is he looking at our house?’ I ask Helen.

‘Is he a tramp?’

‘Tramps don’t have cars, spastic!’

She fidgets with the curtain.

I stare at the figure and start to feel nervous about why he doesn’t move his head away and look at any of the other houses in our road apart from number eleven.

‘If he’s looking at us, maybe we should tell someone,’ I suggest. ‘Just to make sure.’

Together we leave the house and cross the road to see if the Nelsons are at home. It’s only a short way, but Helen grips my hand so that it hurts. I don’t try to shake her off.

The Nelsons have a new doorbell, a loud, electronic version of the national anthem. It plays for several minutes before stopping, accompanied by the frenzied yapping of the terrier from a room at the back of the house.

We stand stiffly outside the door and stare through the frosted glass, willing figures to appear in the hall.

‘Maybe they’re out,’ Helen says.

‘Try again.’

Mrs Nelson has placed a pair of white marble statuettes on the doorstep, and I rest my palm on the head of the elegant figure my side. Her hair is a mass of beautiful chiselled ringlets. Dressed in a stone toga, she holds a dove in her left hand. I wish our mother had the same taste as Mrs Nelson, but Rebecca always laughs at the Nelsons’ new things. She says we are forbidden from ever buying her birthday or Christmas presents from Nelson’s Eye in town.

The national anthem comes to an end for a second time.

The stone figure on Helen’s side is the mirror image of my statue, holding a dove in her delicate right hand. The statues are lighter than they look, however, because when Helen leans against her one its plinth shunts back to the edge of the doorstep and it nearly topples over.

‘Watch out!’ I say, dropping her hand.

I have started to feel foolish about the way we both reacted, and I'm angry at Helen for smothering me with her blanket of fear before I had the chance to think clearly for myself.

I'm glad the Nelsons weren't in. What would Mrs Nelson have thought of me? I don't want her to think I've suddenly turned into my sister, placing myself at the centre of everything, thinking some speck on the horizon is coming to get us.

As we stand on the doorstep, listening to the terrier's frantic bark in the empty house, I realise that, unless I do something, my sister and I will be locked together like this forever, caught like eels in the same net, squirming, bumping, bruising each other. I take her hand and squeeze it harder than before, feeling her bones shift in my grip.

'Ow! You're hurting me. You always do that. Why can't you hold my hand properly, like you're supposed to?'

We get back to number eleven just as Rebecca pulls up and parks.

'Hello, girls! Help me with this stuff.' She pulls bags of books out of the boot and hands them to us. 'Be careful! New! Just arrived.'

They don't look new. The ones in my carrier bags are covered with mildew.

'Shhh!' I frown at my sister and shake my head as she opens her mouth to spill her beans about the strange man watching our house.

But as soon as we've brought the books inside number eleven, we race upstairs to our separate rooms.

I know she's looking out of her window as well.

If the strange figure had still been sitting over on the far bank, he would have seen two pale figures standing in the upstairs windows of the house, one on the right, one on the left, like flecks of light in a pair of eyes on the same frightened face.

Mon 10th October

She faces him on the rickety folding-chair in the shop. Up and down, up and down, up and down she goes.

I can't hear anything, but I know what he's singing. My dad used to play this game with me. 'This is the way the lady rides, boom-ti boom-ti boom.'

I see her squeal with delight.

I can almost hear her shouting, 'Do it again!'

'This is the way the gentleman rides, boom-ti boom-ti boom.'

I watch them play the game all the way through to the drunk man who falls off the horse and lands in a ditch. She slithers through the gap between his legs, but he keeps his hands firmly supporting her body so she doesn't hurt herself or get dirty on the floor.

As revenge on Helen, I stop by at the Nelsons' house on my way home and tell Mrs Nelson that my sister has been wandering off on her own again. I suspect she's been stealing from somebody's house because of the number of sweets she brings home from her secret expeditions.

Tues 11th October

'Hello,' Katie Nelson says in a watery voice as I push at her bedroom door with my foot and carefully manoeuvre the tray through the gap.

The terrier barges in and springs onto the bed, wagging its stumpy tail and panting.

Katie's been in bed for ten days.

The dressing's been taken off the wound on her forehead, and I try not to stare when I see what lies underneath. The stitches stand out in the shape of a broad smile, beaming out a livid, black-toothed greeting just above her right eyebrow.

'Your mum says you've got to eat this.' I place the tray of food on her lap and sit at the other end of the bed, trying not to stare at The Smile.

She winces as she sits up.

On the tray is a boiled egg covered with a pretty lace egg-cosy and a plate heaped with triangles of toast and butter. Mrs Nelson has made a cup of tea in a beautiful china cup covered with pictures of flowers, and she's placed a gleaming silver teaspoon in the saucer.

Katie gazes at the tray but she doesn't start to eat. 'Want a piece of toast?'

‘Aren’t you better yet?’ I lift the dripping triangle to my mouth and look around.

Every flat surface in Katie’s room is covered with get-well cards. There are pictures of kittens with balls of wool and milky eyes, and puppies and teddy bears hugging each other with benign, toothless smiles. I spot my homemade card on the windowsill.

‘I keep going dizzy. Especially when I close my eyes or try to get out of bed.’

In between bites, I point a buttery finger at the array of strange tubs and tubes lined up on her bedside table. ‘Is that medicine or what?’

‘The doctor says the scar’ll turn white, like a white line, and the stitches will look like white dots. But it’ll always be there. Mum says maybe if I grow my fringe long like yours, it won’t show.’

The dog licks its lips and stares at me, cocking its head to the left and the right. I lick my fingers and take another piece of toast, making sure I waft the scent past the dog’s nose to torture it. ‘But what about all those tubs and stuff?’

‘She keeps buying different ones. I’ve got to put it on. She’s trying to find a match for my skin colour so we can cover up the scar.’

One by one, she tosses the makeup over to my end of the bed. I unscrew the lids and daub different tones on the back of my hands. The shades range from sickly pale to Mediterranean bronze, with dozens of colours in-between.

‘Lizzie?’

‘Yea?’

Katie is staring at me. Her eyes are like horrible little darts.

‘What happened to my pink bag? D’you know? Mum keeps saying a man from the factory took it. But I don’t think that’s right. You took it out the basket, didn’t you?’

‘No, I think you had it with you,’ I say carefully, looking directly at her.

She frowns.

I look away. ‘I’m not sure what you did with it after the accident. You definitely didn’t give it to me before you rode off.’

‘I can’t remember what happened.’

I need to divert Katie’s attention from the bag. When I was five, I tell her, I lost my memory after a car crash with my dad in which I broke my leg. The car

did three somersaults before landing on its roof by the side of the road. The Police found me wandering through a cornfield, holding a poppy. The car was a mini, and we were playing 'Penny Lane' by the Beatles at the time.

'How could you walk if you'd broken your leg?'

Even though she's had concussion, Katie's still quite clever. I can see why she passed her eleven plus and ended up at my school.

'I was in shock. That's when you don't feel the pain until later. You know. It's the same as you had.'

'Oh.'

'I'm really sorry about what happened to your bike. Will your dad get you another one?'

The smile on her forehead puckers. 'I don't want another bike.' After a pause, she says, 'I want my bag back. It was my favourite one. And my money.' She gazes at the back of her bedroom door, where a hundred different handbags dangle, straps intertwined in a multi-coloured mess of plastic and leather.

'Why don't you tell your mum you put the bag down, but you forgot to pick it up again?' I suggest. 'That way, she won't cause trouble at the factory and she'll buy you another one the same. Maybe that's what really happened? You put it down somewhere?'

'I don't know.'

I must continue to be nice to Katie. 'Want me to go and look for it? Maybe you dropped it in the grass by the creek near that hawthorn bush on the left, quite near the top of the road?' I feel myself blushing. 'Here, your mum says eat this.'

'I'm not hungry. You can have it if you like.'

I eat the egg, and by the time I've finished it Katie is almost asleep.

Wed 12th October

I wash the dishes very slowly, letting the froth cover my fingers and wrists. Then I immerse both arms fully in the washing-up bowl, pretending my limbs belong to a drowned girl in the creek.

I saw something very upsetting through the shop window this evening. I knew she was in there, even though she had cunningly thrown her bike against the fence of number sixteen to make it look as if she'd gone to play with Katie Nelson.

The car was missing from the drive of the shop, and the Venetian blinds in the window were almost closed, slanting at a strict angle.

The lights had been turned off inside, and at first glance it looked like nobody was there. I crouched down in the drive, pressing myself into the shadows. Keeping my head low, I crawled out on all fours. Every time I heard a car on the road, or the sound of footsteps, I bolted into the passageway at the back of the drive. Every time I crept out again, my eyes strained to see through the grey tones and murky spaces inside.

Two shadowless shapes moved about inside. The tall shape held out its hands to the small thin shape, and the small thin shape reached out its hands too. Then both shapes melted into a single dark patch, like a stain, and I couldn't see any spaces in-between them.

Thurs 13th October

I can hear our mother's voice saying, increasingly assertively, 'Lizzie is perfectly capable of keeping an eye on her sister.'

She pauses. I can't work out who she's talking to. Clearly this is not one of Rebecca's old friends. They all seem to live too far away to visit, but they phone up all the time.

'Yes, I am aware of that, thank you.'

After a very long pause, she says, 'I only leave the girls alone in the house when there's absolutely no alternative.'

Then she says a terrible thing which makes my stomach freeze. 'If I were you, Mrs Nelson, I wouldn't pay too much attention to what Lizzie says. I'm afraid she's rather prone to exaggeration.'

I can't believe that my own mother is trying to sabotage my reputation with Mrs Nelson.

In her about-to-put-the-phone-down voice, she says, 'Well. Anyway. That's very kind of you to offer. I certainly will think about that. Really, though, I wouldn't say that Helen's "roaming around the village like a gypsy".'

Fri 14th October

A feeling of panic grows in my stomach as I read. I pull out the previous letter, and the one before that.

I've uncovered an open secret and it feels like an open wound.

My dad's been a terrible cheat. Every time he writes to us, he copies out the same letter twice, once for Helen, once for me, mimicking my letter in her letter, her letter in mine. The only thing he changes is the name after 'dear' at the top of the page. He can't remember us separately, so he's made us the same.

Whenever a letter arrives for me, I scurry the envelope upstairs and lie on my bed to devour his special words in private. Now I picture him putting each letter into its own separate envelope to make us think we're different, closing it, addressing it, posting it off, and then laughing at us for being so gullible. He's made a complete fool out of me.

I'll show him that I'm different from her.

Sat 15th October

We sit in a pool of Saturday morning sunshine with mirrors propped in front of us. Colourful jars, tubes, sticks, tubs and brushes surround us. A bottle of Pepsi chills in a silver ice-bucket at the centre of the table. It's real silver. You can tell. On the carpet by the sofa, a small pink suitcase gapes open, empty except for a pair of eyelash tongs.

Using me as her beautician's model, Mrs Nelson has shown us how to put face-powder over our foundation and where to put blusher to emphasise the natural shape of our cheekbones. She describes how you should paint the whole eye, including the fleshy part over the lid, right up to the eyebrow. She says that I have radiant skin and gorgeous rosebud lips like Agnes Ayres, and when my

breasts grow a bit bigger and I lose my puppy fat, I'll have the figure to match. I will meet my Rudolph Valentino.

I don't like her talking about my breasts like that. And I don't care who Rudolph Valentino is.

After ten minutes of painful tweaking, Mrs Nelson says she has nearly restored the natural curve of my eyebrows.

'Stop fidgeting, pet', she says, patting my knee.

She chose me because Katie's need to learn is more urgent than mine. I can see what she means, because of all her scars and scabby bits, and Helen's too young and immature to sit patiently as a beautician's model. Besides that, my sister's got two hairy caterpillars crawling in opposite directions over her forehead, so she needs to listen and learn.

But I want Mrs Nelson to stop. I keep my eyes closed while her fingers rub warm liquids into my skin. She prods at me with brushes. My heart has started to race. I can feel her breath on my cheeks. I wouldn't mind some fresh air.

I fidget in the chair.

'Okay, all done!' she pronounces at long last.

I open my eyes, but refuse to look in the mirror.

Helen says I look really grownup. I glower at her. That's precisely why I will never wear makeup. Dad's got to be able to recognise me when he comes home. Things are bad enough without makeup. My skin used to be smooth and flat, like a clean sheet of paper. Now my disobedient body has swollen up and ballooned in strange places.

Mrs Nelson gazes sadly at Katie. 'You're never too young to learn how to do your own makeup, especially when you've got a *disfigurement*.'

'Unless you're a boy,' Helen squeals, acting as if she's said something rude.

Katie giggles and looks indulgently at my sister.

Mrs Nelson scatters handfuls of bright eye-shadows on the table and tells us to experiment with different combinations for ourselves. In case we make mistakes with our new faces when we try out the colours, she distributes bottles of makeup remover and cotton-wool buds.

I snatch all the glittering, metallic eye-shadows before the others can get hold of them. Revelling in the idea that these rich colours are called *shadows*, I dab each square of powder with a finger and rub the back of my hand, admiring the way my skin is transformed into a peacock tail of golds, silvers, reds and blues. I would love to have a shadow as beautiful as this.

‘Now practise what I’ve shown you while I get on with some jobs round the house.’

Mrs Nelson disappears into the kitchen. We hear the fridge door open.

As soon as she’s gone, I squeeze moisturiser onto a bud and drag it across my face. The cotton wool fills with thick brown sludge. I repeat the procedure again and again until my face is completely clean.

I was happy to spend time with Katie Nelson this morning until it was made clear that the invitation included my sister. Instead of greeting me properly when I arrived at her house, Katie asked why Helen wasn’t there. When I explained that my sister said she’d rather play in her bedroom by herself, Katie ran over to number eleven before I could stop her and reappeared seconds later, skipping up the road with my beaming sister hanging off her arm like an empty bag.

Now they keep tittering as they try to put on exactly the same colours as each other, in exactly the same places.

Katie Nelson needs to grow up a bit if she wants to be my friend. When she spends time with my sister, she regresses to an earlier stage of human evolution.

Every time I look up, Helen has moved a fraction of an inch closer to Katie Nelson.

‘Aren’t you going to use some different colours?’ Katie asks me. ‘This one’s really nice.’ She pushes a dull green eye-shadow in my direction.

‘Not if it’s the same colour *you’ve* been trying to put on.’ I don’t see why I should try to humour Katie Nelson any more today.

‘These ones are lovely. Try these.’ Three pink shadows shoot across the table. Using my thumb and forefinger, I remove each one from my neat row of metallic colours.

‘Pink is nice on this bit, look.’ Katie points her brush at a section of my sister’s eyelid.

Mrs Nelson hums and sprays outside. Slowly, the scent of Chanel No.5 is displaced by the smell of furniture polish.

The dog scratches and licks itself underneath Katie's chair.

I ask Katie to pass the gold lipstick. She slides it over to my side, and I use it to write *his* initials in my secret code on the back of my hand, on top of the eye-shadow colours. I reverse the first P and connect its spine with the second P to look like the wings on a dragonfly. I paint the wings with swirling blue and silver patterns.

'I wish I had a little sister,' Katie bursts out as she dabs Helen's eyelids with a brush.

My sister writhes on her chair with pleasure. Her chin tilts upwards. I can see the bones in her jaw.

Katie has no idea how difficult life is for the older sister. You have to get used to being followed around all day by an Unwanted Person who demands to know exactly what you're doing and tries to copy everything you do. You are forced to play games with somebody you don't like. You have to share all your possessions, including toys, clothes, parents, crisps and sweets. Nothing you own is Private Property. All of your space is invaded, including your baths. Even your air is disturbed. If you don't answer her questions the first time around, she repeats them twenty times at the top of her voice. Worst of all, when you grow out of your favourite dress, you have to watch her prancing about in it, showing off how well it fits, showing you how much you've changed.

'I'll swap with you any day.' I say passionately. 'I wish I was an only child. I'd love to live here with your mum.'

Katie pauses, and looks over at me. 'There's nothing to do here except watch telly in my room.' Suddenly she drops her voice to a whisper. 'And my mum's scary sometimes.'

Mrs Nelson bustles through, holding a canister of Mr Muscle in her pink rubber gloves. 'How are you getting on, girls? Time for some more nibbles? Why have you taken off your pretty face, Lizzie?'

I can't believe that Katie is capable of telling such terrible lies about her mum. 'We're fine thank you, Mrs Nelson,' I reply, beaming at her.

'Aren't you going to try some of these nice colours?' She flicks through the metallic eye-shadows in my line.

‘Maybe in a minute.’

Mrs Nelson wanders out of the room and bumps her shoulder on the doorframe.

Katie has an idea. ‘Let’s pretend we’re sisters! We can be three sisters and go out on an adventure. I’ll be the middle one.’

Helen nods in excitement. She’s moved so close to Katie, now, that she’s almost attached to her side. ‘I’ll be youngest. You can look after me, Katie.’

I need to get certain matters straight with Katie Nelson. We don’t share friends in our family. ‘You’ve got to choose.’

‘Why can’t we share?’ She sounds genuinely perplexed.

I give her a legal look. ‘It’s one of the rules.’

‘You can’t make me choose.’ Katie is distressed. ‘That’s not fair! I like both of you the same.’

‘I’ll be off then.’ I stand up and push the chair neatly under the table.

‘Stay here! Let’s keep playing.’

‘I don’t have time to play with you two little kids.’ I close the door behind me.

As I walk down the road, I feel a little bit guilty about spoiling Katie’s morning, but I know that my hard line will pay dividends in the long term.

Rebecca stands in the hall, surrounded by bags. ‘Your eyebrows! Where’ve they gone?’

‘We’ve been experimenting with Mrs Nelson’s makeup.’

‘That’s ridiculous! You’re just children! Did *she* pluck your eyebrows?’ Her tone of voice conjures up a terrible vision of Rebecca storming up the road to have it out with Mrs Nelson.

‘We did it to ourselves. I did my own eyebrows.’

‘And Helen?’

‘She didn’t do anything to hers.’ I lock my fingers together behind my back to hide my bleeding cuticles.

‘Don’t do these things to yourself. Don’t mutilate your body! You’re lovely as you are!’

Just in case Rebecca tries to give me a hug, I pick up some bags and hurry into the kitchen.

Mon 17th October

When I realised that Those Three Girls were coming my way again today, I ran up to the prefects guarding the doors, told them I desperately needed to go to the toilet, dashed up the stairs, and hid for the entire lunch hour in amongst the sixth formers' donkey jackets and duffel coats on the third floor.

I didn't dare move.

I didn't even try to discover the contents of people's pockets.

I remained completely still, barely breathing, buried alive.

I heard teachers walk past towards the staffroom, but nobody saw me.

My lunch hour smelt of hairspray, chip fat, stale cigarettes, sweet perfume, and an array of other aromas from people's homes which the fabric had absorbed.

I might not be able to hide there again. I need to make a Plan.

Tues 18th October

Rebecca's giving a public lecture on 7th November. For ages she's been muttering, waving scraps of paper around covered with scrawled notes, even stopping the car by the side of the road to scribble ideas on the backs of shopping lists, hankies and receipts.

She went to the doctor today.

'Beta blockers,' she says, unscrewing the lid of a brown bottle and extracting a pill as we sit down to dinner. 'To stop me trembling. So people can't see I'm nervous.'

I've made oven pizza for us all, natural cheese and tomato flavour.

'I hope the audience will grasp the importance of my research. Then perhaps they'll start to talk seriously about offering me a permanent post in the department.'

We only heard the typewriter for the first time last night. Maybe her fingers were trembling too much to type. She must have been writing her lecture by hand before that.

When she saw the posy of paper flowers Helen put on her desk this evening as a good luck present, she reminded us both not to go into the study because she doesn't want any of her books or papers to be disturbed.

As we eat, Helen says something sensible for once. 'Why don't you get a proper job? Then we can afford to buy nice things for the house. You can have fun in the evenings and you don't have to get nervous ever again.'

'I'm not much good at anything else, I'm afraid.' Rebecca replies apologetically, swilling a tablet down with a gulp of water.

My sister persists. 'But can't you be a teacher in a school? They get really long holidays.'

'Then I'd never finish writing my monograph.'

I raise my eyes to the ceiling. In the time it's taken our mother to write her *monograph* so far, both Helen and I have achieved the following, in chronological order:

1. Being born.
2. Learning to crawl.
3. Learning to walk.
4. Learning to talk.
5. Learning to read.
6. Learning to write.

Meanwhile, our mother has produced sheet after sheet of crossed-out notes.

Fri 21st October

I avoid Katie Nelson when she plays and laughs with my sister instead of spending time with me because the expression on her face makes me want to climb inside her skin and squeeze each internal organ until it pops in my fists.

Mr Nelson gives her whatever she wants from his shop in town. 'Nelson's Eye' is an emporium packed with wallpapers, paints, pictures and ornaments. Rebecca always snorts with laughter and says the stuff is *kitsch*. She wonders which eye is used when Mr Nelson chooses his stock. She obviously hasn't seen the beautiful porcelain ballerina who appeared in the window on Wednesday,

pirouetting, pale hands clasped above her head, fragile and elegant, fingers poised, a far-off expression on her miniature face.

I think Mrs Nelson has told Katie to be nice to me, because tonight she keeps inviting me into her bedroom to listen to her new singles and to try on clothes and make-up along with my sister.

I refuse. I sit downstairs, playing with my empty glass. I feel quite relaxed now.

I suck on the skin of my olive.

Rebecca's new arrangement with Mrs Nelson has deprived me of my source of income, but I like it here at number sixteen. Mrs Nelson gives me preferential treatment. She's always willing to chat to me, and she listens to what I say. Instead of going to number eleven after school, we come here every evening for two hours instead.

The terrier rushes in from the garden and tries to lick my ankles and toes. Its moist pink tongue lolls through its teeth and its eyes bulge up in an effort to look directly at my face. It simpers at my feet, half-rolling over on the carpet, front paws hooked in begging position. I hate the way it always acts as if it likes me so much. It smells sweet, like icing sugar mixed with talcum powder. Making sure nobody is looking, I kick it in the ribs. Just one sharp kick. After that, it leaves me alone.

I sit quietly with my books spread out on the dining room table and the television turned low in the background.

Mrs Nelson pops through, holding another glass full of clear liquid. An olive bobs around happily in the drink. As she sips, she peers over my shoulder at my exercise book. 'English, is it?'

I nod. A tight tyre moves gently under Mrs Nelson's jumper when she leans forward. She smiles encouragingly, and the ice tinkles in her glass.

I focus on my exercise book and try to ignore her warm breath in my ear.

'Well, I'll let you get on, pet.' She wanders off again in the direction of the kitchen.

I'm writing a story about a tramp stranded outside a frost-covered window gazing in at children eating Christmas dinner. I've just got to the bit where he turns away from the window in mournful lonely solitude and sits down on the front step. The tramp will die on the doorstep during the night, and the

children will find him in the morning when they come out to build a snowman. My tramps always wear fingerless knitted gloves. They stand alone, looking through windows at happy family scenes.

At six o'clock, our mother phones to summon us back to number eleven for tea.

Sun 23rd October

'We've only got a black-and-white telly,' my sister informs the entire Nelson household.

The dog looks at her sympathetically.

We are gathered in a semi-circle around the smoked-glass cabinet housing Katie's new stereo. In the glass, our reflections look as if they have tropical suntans.

Downstairs, the Nelsons have the biggest television set I've ever seen, and a new VHS video player. Up here in Katie's room, the telly is smaller, but it's got a remote control so she doesn't have to get up to change channels.

'How terrible!' says Mrs Nelson. She examines a manicured hand. After a pause, she adds thoughtfully, 'but maybe it's better to have black-and-white. You don't see all the blood when that Attenborough man makes you watch lions killing little bambis in Africa.' She shudders. 'Chewing off their legs while they're still alive.'

'Red in tooth and claw,' Mr Nelson says.

Instead of shutting her trap, Helen goes on to itemise all the empty sockets and blank spaces throughout the length and breadth of number eleven.

'We haven't got a deep freeze either, or a video, or a proper shower,' she says, counting off each absence on a finger. 'We haven't got a washing-up machine. Or duvets. We still have blankets and sheets. Our fridge is from when they got married.'

I don't mention how I found a bluebottle flying around inside the fridge during the summer holidays. I stunned it with my flip-flop and left it to die in the vegetable box.

Helen is cunning and manipulative. She saves the most important parental violation until last. ‘The only record player in the house is the one in her study. And we’re not allowed to go in there.’

Watching Helen drop hints for Katie’s old record player makes my stomach turn over in shame. She’s such a scrounger! I don’t know where to look. She’s airing all our dirty washing-up in public. She has presented the Nelsons with a picture of their own house painted in the negative. In a flash, Mrs Nelson wraps Helen’s arms around Katie’s old record-player. Knees buckling under the weight, she disappears through the door before they can change their minds.

I don’t offer to help her carry it down the road. I had my eye on that record player myself.

Mon 24th October

Every time Rebecca opens the door to wander into the kitchen for another mug of tea, *The Magic Flute* escapes from the study, filling all the spaces of number eleven with merriment. She’s been coming and going from the study all evening, whistling along to the music.

On my pillow, dozens of copies of *My Guy*, borrowed from Katie Nelson, lie open at the problem pages. I can’t follow my sister tonight. I’m in Big Trouble at school, and I need to stay in my bedroom to work out a Plan. I’ve scoured the magazines to see if anybody else has ever asked for help with a similar topic, but all of the letters ask about how to get boyfriends or the best ways to lose weight.

I’ve known for ages that something was brewing.

Today they escalated their campaign. At lunch-break they followed me, walking so close to my heels that I kept tripping over. I couldn’t turn around without being nose-to-nose with them. As they hounded me, they listed all the dirty things I’d been doing with my boyfriend. When I told them I haven’t got a boyfriend, they screamed with laughter and called me a lesbian. After that, their descriptions got a lot worse.

As a last resort before going to bed, I decide to raise my concerns with Rebecca. I’ve never asked for my mother’s advice before, and I’ve got no idea how she’ll respond to my problem.

There's a rustling noise inside the study.

'Come in!' Rebecca calls.

She peers at me. I feel awkward standing in front of her, trying to describe the behaviour of Those Three Girls. I tell Rebecca how I kept saying 'leave me alone,' but it was impossible to ignore them because they wouldn't stop shouting obscene things in my ears. I explain that I know for a fact Those Three Girls mean to cause more trouble tomorrow. Whenever I see them, a skewer of fear enters my throat and twists through my body.

Rebecca's eyes wander back to the papers on her desk. She fidgets with a Magic Marker. 'But what exactly did they say to you?'

'They keep saying really dirty things.' I can't possibly repeat what they said. It's too shocking.

'Bullies are cowards deep down,' Rebecca observes. 'Ignore them. They'll soon get bored with you and move on to somebody else. You have to rise above it. I can see you're worried, darling, but I'm sure you'll have forgotten about it by the end of term. Let's reassess in a couple of weeks, shall we?'

I give her a withering look. Rebecca makes it sound as if the situation is my fault, as if I've done something to encourage them.

'You should think of a smart put-down remark to embarrass them in front of each other,' she suggests brightly, then adds, 'you know, sometimes the bullies have been bullied at home. What do you know about their parents? You never know what goes on behind closed doors...'

As I leave the room, Rebecca tells me to remember that sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

But I know she's wrong. Words *can* hurt you.

Thurs 27th October

Mrs Nelson has lovely pink lips and permed yellow hair. She wears a chunky gold chain around her neck. As she wipes the kitchen units using pine-scented fluid, she tells me that Mr Nelson got the necklace from a special offer in the *Radio Times* last Valentine's Day for just twenty-five pounds.

The Nelson's house is so carefully insulated with double glazing, and so full of its own lovely internal scents, that you can't smell anything from the bone factory at all, even on the smelliest of bone days.

At five o'clock Mrs Nelson pours a drink: tonight she makes a Vodka Martini, but on other nights she makes brightly-coloured cocktails, or pours a Gordon's topped up with a dash of Schweppes.

Mr Nelson spends most evenings in the garage listening to Radio Two and mending his Ford Capri. Mrs Nelson says he doesn't like children very much, or dogs, or noise. I know precisely how the poor man feels. Even though he never speaks directly to me, I think we share a quiet electrical connection.

'Chin-chin,' Mrs Nelson says, raising the glass to her lips. The ice-cubes chime out like the rigging on the creek.

She always smiles at me. The Nelsons are so rich they buy new dinner plates all the time. I never know if the plates our snacks arrive on today will be the same as the plates we had yesterday.

I cradle my glass and sit with her while Helen and Katie race around the house, shrieking.

'Katie doesn't like me drinking,' she tells me. 'One small drink won't kill you.'

We touch the rims of our glasses together, saying 'chin-chin' and laughing. My glass feels heavy, even before she's poured my gin and tonic. Mrs Nelson says I should call my drink a 'G&T,' or, if I want to be amusing, a 'grin and bear it.'

'These are beautiful glasses,' I tell her.

I shouldn't call it a glass, Mrs Nelson tells me. I must call it Waterford Crystal Stemware. It's part of the set Mr Nelson bought in Harrods for their fifteenth wedding anniversary last year. He spent ten pounds for every year they were married.

'We got married in November,' she tells me. 'If in October you do marry, love will come but riches tarry. But if you wed in bleak November, only joys will come, so you just remember! Remember that for future reference, young lady.' She taps the side of her long, pale nose knowingly with a finger.

'What about March?' I ask, remembering that Rebecca once said she and Dad got married in March with daffodils all around.

Mrs Nelson pauses. Her pink lips swell and contract as she tries to recall the lines. Finally she pronounces triumphantly, 'If you wed when March winds blow, joy and sorrow both you'll know.'

'That's not very nice.'

The Waterford Crystal Stemware includes champagne flutes and cocktail glasses. As I sip my second drink I try to visualise a champagne flute, but it flutters away.

Whenever Mrs Nelson tries to take a gulp, the coaster sticks to the base of her Waterford Crystal Stemware. She flicks the coaster off each time, but I can see she's getting frustrated because she keeps trying to wipe the bottom of the glass on her sleeve, nearly spilling her drink.

When she makes cocktails, Mrs Nelson always adds a glacé cherry on a stick and a miniature paper umbrella with dainty wooden spokes. The correct word is 'parasol,' not 'umbrella,' she tells me. Parasols are always used in drinks from tropical countries such as Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil and Belgium. As well as cocktails, I like Baileys with three cubes of ice, Malibu, and Southern Comfort with lemonade and lime.

The living room smells of furniture polish. Paintings of exotic birds hang all around, bright colours flashing against the rich green wallpaper. Their beaks are orange and yellow and red. A stuffed bird perches on a twig under a bell-jar on the mantelpiece. The carpet springs like moss under my feet.

Tonight, even though it's nearly winter time, Mrs Nelson showed me how to spray my hair with lemon juice and Sun-In for natural blonde streaks when the sun shines.

'If I was a young man and I had to choose between you and your sister, I'd choose you any time,' she says, squeezing her eyes closed at me, then opening them again. 'Don't get me wrong. Your sister's a pretty little thing, but with all those dark curls and that complexion, she'll start to look a bit foreign and trashy in a few years' time. But you, with your lovely brown hair and fair skin, you'll look beautiful once you've had a proper haircut and put on a bit of makeup.'

We drink a small tumbler of Stones Ginger Wine to counterbalance the sweetness of the cakes. Mrs Nelson says it's a pleasure to see me enjoy the snacks and drinks she provides for us after school.

‘What a shame Helen won’t eat these,’ I remark, licking my forefinger and dabbing at the crumbs on my plate. Whenever Mrs Nelson holds the plate under Helen’s nose, she shudders as if the cakes are full of poison.

Two firm lines form in the magnolia powder on Mrs Nelson’s forehead.

I know Helen’s worried in case the cakes have lard in them. Lard is made from the bones of dead animals, and my sister says she can smell it on people’s skin, even at school and in the supermarket.

I sip my ginger wine and nibble my cake. But after a while, I start to picture the lard oozing out of the pores in my armpits. Feeling a bit queasy, I slide the cake down the side of the sofa, and I only just manage to say ‘chin-chin’ when we have a drop more ginger wine.

Helen and Katie stamp around in Katie’s bedroom, screeching and laughing as if they are small children.

One of the main reasons I like Mrs Nelson is that my sister’s little-girl voice has no affect whatsoever on her. In fact, whenever she says Helen’s name, Mrs Nelson arches her eyebrows and purses her lips. She says my sister has a lot of strange ideas for a nine-year-old.

I would like to be Mrs Nelson’s daughter. I would like to warn her to make sure my sister’s strange ideas don’t rub off on Katie when the two girls romp through the house after school.

Hard lumps of cake stick to the roof of my mouth. I dab at my lips with a serviette. The exotic birds in the living room slide down the walls and swim around as if they’ve turned into fish.

I tell Mrs Nelson about some of my sister’s strange ideas, which include refusing to eat meat and refusing to wear anything made out of leather.

Mrs Nelson snorts, and her nostrils flare in a figure of eight. ‘I’m surprised your mum puts up with it.’ She sighs and picks a crumb of scone out of her tooth with a pink fingernail. I notice a streak of lipstick on her incisors. Then, in a new voice, she asks, ‘don’t you ever get to see your dad, pet?’

Squeals of piercing little-girl laughter tumble down the stairs. ‘One mushroom, *tra-la-la*, two mushrooms, *tra-la-la!*’ Helen shouts, and Katie joins in, ‘three, three, three mushrooms *tra-la-la!*’ They thump the floor, howling with laughter, making the dog bark.

‘He’s away. Travelling.’

I don't know if I want to talk to Mrs Nelson any more. I've got homework to do. Every night this week, she's asked a few more questions. I can feel her circling around the fading image I have of my dad, tucked away privately inside me. I am in a difficult position.

'He was a teacher,' I say, offering her a Fact she knows already. 'He went away suddenly, but it wasn't our fault. It was his work. The pressure.'

I have given her this small morsel of truth about my dad because she's looking for something solid. This can be her thank you present for being so nice to me in the evenings after school.

Her eyes dart about as she unwraps my information in her mind. Beneath her sweet perfume, Mrs Nelson smells faintly of sweat.

I stare at a beautiful bird of paradise which fills a scarlet frame on the living-room wall. Jagged emerald leaves surround it, but the forest in the background is almost black.

'Yes, but when does he come to visit? I can't say I've ever seen him, and we've been here nearly a year.'

I fidget with my pencil case. 'I'd better start my homework,' I say in my most chirpy voice.

'Not once, I bet! You poor love! He abandoned you!' Mrs Nelson stops herself suddenly. 'Write him a nice letter, and get that silly sister of yours to do the same. I'm sure he'd come for a visit if you did that.'

'We do write letters. He writes back all the time.' I have no idea how to stop her from talking. The fact is that my Dad doesn't write very often any more. He can't. He's busy in his new job as a volunteer.

'Are you a bit worried about seeing him?'

'We're all fine, thank you.'

I'll never tell anybody this, but when I close my eyes, I can't see the details of his face any more, just a blur of beard and glasses. If Rebecca had stuck our family photos into an album and labelled them properly, I would at least be able to locate his picture whenever I needed a reminder.

Helen and Katie race downstairs, chased by the terrier. All three are panting and blinking at each other. The girls start to throw a squeaky ball to and fro in the living room, too close to where I'm sitting, and the dog runs hysterically between them, barking, snapping at the air. The screeching of the

girls combines with the yapping of the bulgy-eyed dog to completely disrupt my peace of mind. I try to focus on the writing in my biology textbook, but it slithers around in front of my eyes.

Helen and Katie let the dog lick their faces. They roll on the living-room floor with it, giggling with pleasure while it barks excitedly and bounds around.

‘Go into the garden, girls, and let poor Lizzie get on with her homework,’ Mrs Nelson calls to the over-excited trio.

I watch them race outside into the cold air, but they rush straight back in again, screaming about the stench from the bone factory. I imagine their bowels and stomachs full of writhing worms from the dog.

Fri 28th October

I survey the empty fridge, slam the door, and march along the corridor to the study.

‘I’m starving. What’s for dinner?’

‘Pardon, darling?’

The first time, a couple of weeks ago, when there was nothing left to eat, she thumped her forehead. ‘I knew there was something.’

She gave me money to buy baked beans and oven chips from the village shop. *He* served me. It was wonderful. We chatted for hours.

Rebecca is not interested in shopping at the moment because she’s still writing her public lecture. As I stand outside the study door and wonder out loud, for the second time, what we’re having for tea, the guilty voice inside confirms, ‘I haven’t actually had time to stock up this week.’

Enough is enough. I open the door and face her. ‘I’ll do the shopping from now on. Give me the money. Then you can concentrate on your work and get your talk finished.’

If she puts me in charge of shopping and cooking, I can see *him* every single day.

‘It’s not a *talk*, darling.’ She throws my word back like a rotten vegetable. ‘It’s a *public lecture*. Anyway, I’m not particularly hungry tonight with that terrible smell...’

‘I’ll get the dinner ready,’ I say. ‘I don’t mind.’

Rebecca tells me to cover my nose with a scarf, take her purse out of her handbag, and run up to the village shop to find something easy to cook for tea.

Sat 29th October

Another convoy of trucks trundles up the road, churning through the puddles, exhaling blasts of black exhaust and disappearing through the gates. Seagulls swarm around the top of the factory. The chimneys belch rancid odours through the village.

In the street outside, a few brave drivers jump into their cars and accelerate away, keeping their windows tightly closed.

I examine the bubble of glass trapped in my Victorian windowpane.

Mr Nelson revs his Capri as he drives past with Katie in the passenger seat. He looks like a gangster. His face is masked by a white polo-neck jumper all the way up to the bridge of his nose.

The stench has kept us prisoner all week, gagging behind sealed windows and doors every evening after school. On the positive side, however, it’s prevented Helen from visiting *him* since Tuesday. Forced to stay in her bedroom, she’s been playing Tubby the Tuba again and again on Katie’s old record player until I want to snap the stupid record in half with its um-pah um-pah um-pah.

I’ve been standing at my window since seven o’clock this morning, watching the road in case *he* comes past. I can’t leave my place, not even for a pee, in case my sister tries to sneak off with him. She’s currently in her bedroom, but she’s developed a knack of evaporating from the house.

I need to be vigilant at all times.

Downstairs, our mother keeps listening to the weather forecast, waiting for the wind to change direction so she can hang out the washing and get on with her writing.

Mrs Phillips drives down the road, a red scarf wrapped around her nose and mouth, orange hair spilling down her shoulders. I catch a glimpse of the baby’s fat thigh in the back of the car.

Rebecca bursts out of the kitchen downstairs. ‘Girls, I’m going to the library. Can’t do anything here. Bloody smell!’

She slams the door and drives away. She doesn’t even tell us when she will be back.

Less than a second after our mother leaves, Helen sneaks out of the front door. I see a flash of white running up the road. As quickly as possible, I wrap a scarf round my mouth and follow her up to the shop.

Mon 31st October

I take a large handful of headache pills from our mother’s handbag in the hall and drop them onto the dinner plate with a clatter. I will use these as a base to bulk out the rest. I fill an old Robinsons jam jar with bleach from the cupboard under the kitchen sink, close the lid and balance it on the plate beside the pills. From the top shelf of the bathroom cabinet, I take three or four tablets here and there. There are numerous half-empty brown bottles on the shelf.

I tiptoe past the study and walk quickly upstairs to my room. The pattern on the dinner plate curls beneath my assembled materials. Now that I’ve gathered my ingredients, I’m not sure whether I should press ahead with my idea.

I go back downstairs to the kitchen and make myself a mug of tea. I wish Rebecca would emerge from the study and talk to me. But she remains silent.

I lift the pestle and mortar off the kitchen mantelpiece and return upstairs, carrying my tea in the other hand. Steam from the mug dances gracefully in the air.

First of all, I grind up the headache pills, then I add the other pills one by one, crushing and pressing until I have created a mound of powder, white with flecks of pink and blue.

If I am to do this properly, I realise, I can’t possibly make use of the bleach as well. All my other ingredients are designed for human consumption: I can’t pour bleach into the bowl if I am serious about my idea. What would I do with a mixture containing bleach?

I feel as if I'm watching myself from the windowsill. My head is clear but blank. I lick my forefinger, dip it into the mix, and lick the sherbet. A fierce metallic taste claws at the centre of my tongue.

There is only one obvious place to put the bleach. I carry the jar over the landing to Helen's room and push the door open.

When you enter my sister's bedroom, the first thing to strike your nose is the array of pungent plant smells. But beneath this odour there's an underlay of sour body smells. Why do children always smell sour? Some of the first-years at school still carry this odour around with them.

Helen's carpet is covered with dry compost, twigs and crispy brown leaves from her plants. Katie Nelson's record player sits in the corner, lid propped open like a mouth pausing for words.

My sister's houseplant collection has run out of control. Oversized yucca plants lurch towards her window, tangled ivy creeps over her mantelpiece, and an enormous palm tree heaves in its pot. Her bed is surrounded by cuttings. In between the larger plants, there is an abundance of smaller plants in varying degrees of growth and maturity. She's planted baby ferns in miniature terracotta pots, and her spider plants sprout happily all over the room. A group of African violets with healthy green leaves and velvety flowers forms a semi-circle under her window.

Helen keeps the all the weakest plants as well as all the healthy ones. If Rebecca ever prunes her houseplants or tries to throw old ones away, my sister rescues them from the rubbish bin. She fills plastic pots with soil, tucks the outcasts in, and takes them to her room. When they've recovered, she gives them away to people in the village. Up and down our street, you can see her plants in people's front windows. You know they're her plants because she always decorates the old plastic pots with paintings. I'm sure her behaviour makes everybody laugh at us behind our backs. Somebody ought to stop her from doing this kind of thing.

'I bet you don't rescue nettles and weeds or slugs and snails,' I commented a few weeks ago.

'I think everything should be allowed to live,' she replied prissily.

'You're so pathetic,' I informed her.

Starting with the yucca plants, measure by measure, I pour bleach into the pots. The air in the bedroom thickens with the smell. When I finish, I stand in the doorway to survey the scene. Nothing's happened yet, but I imagine the yucca plants drooping together with a sigh, giving up hope as if they're relieved to be set free from this cramped, smelly prison. All around me, the other plants I've tampered with will sag and wilt as the bleach penetrates the soil to their roots. Already the leaves of the giant palm are starting to fall limply down by its trunk.

I wonder if the sharp smell of bleach will still be in the air when my sister comes home. But I couldn't care less. It will be too late by then. She won't be able to change a thing.

I didn't pour any bleach on the cuttings and seedlings. For some reason, a part of me wants to give them a chance. The only survivors will be the ones I haven't touched.

It's nearly eight thirty. I go back to my bedroom and see the heap of powder in the mortar. It will have to wait for another time. For now, I pour it into an old envelope from one of my dad's letters, fold over the top several times, and slide it into the middle of my *Beano* collection.

The house is silent. Helen's still out. I know she's up the road with *him*.

The smell of bleach sits thickly in my pores. I can't get rid of it, no matter how many times I wash my hands in the bathroom. A squirt of Mrs Nelson's perfume would cover up the smell.

I tiptoe out of number eleven and walk up to the shop. Somebody forgot to close the Venetian blinds this evening. I edge forward. But instead of seeing *them*, as I imagined, I see Mrs Phillips in the shop, moving to and fro inside, swinging tins in happy arcs from boxes on the floor up onto the shelves, bottom jiggling, feet shuffling.

As I linger outside, she halts, turns around, and moves towards the window.

I must have stamped on her grave.

I pull back into the drive and press my body into the cool wall of the building. When I emerge, Mrs Phillips has tugged the blinds closed, sealing herself inside.

Helen's wail is loud enough to rattle the foundations of the bone factory and set the boats swaying on the high tide.

Rebecca rushes out of the study, bounding up the stairs with heavy footsteps.

I emerge from my bedroom where I have been composing a letter to Dad.

'What is it?' Rebecca calls in panic. Her face is white. She's trembling like she used to do after a big argument. 'What's happened? Helen?'

Helen is standing at the top of the stairs, shoulders heaving up and down. She turns to look at me, mouth wide open like a cartoon baby, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

At the sight of her, I feel a tiny tweak of guilt. Her chin has puckered into a tight, pock-marked mound, and her hands clench and unclench by her sides.

'Darling!' our mother calls, rushing up the stairs but visibly relieved to see Helen is intact. 'What's the matter?'

She's sobbing too much to make sense, but I know what she's saying. 'My plants. My plants. My plants.'

'Come here, darling.' Rebecca stretches out her arms, but I put my arm around my sister instead, and jig her shoulders up and down. A simple Rule for how to demonstrate your Innocence is to offer comfort to the injured party.

She's still whining about her plants. If she hadn't surrounded herself with so many precious things, she wouldn't get upset like this when something goes wrong. She needs to learn the hard way. I am more experienced in these things than her.

Helen's nose has become too snotty for my liking so I let go. She moves over to Rebecca and buries her head in our mother's body. While they're both preoccupied, I quickly put my head around her bedroom door to sniff the air and survey the wrecked vegetation. The smell of bleach lingers in the background, but it's mingled with all the other scents. I don't think the bleach smell is strong enough to declare itself to noses other than mine. Mine is the nose in the know.

'It looks as if something killed her plants,' I call to Rebecca from the doorway. 'They've wilted really badly. Maybe the central heating wasn't on high enough?'

'Oh, shame!' Rebecca says, looking at me over the top of Helen's head.

Helen has sprouted upwards with surprising speed since the summer. Now she's almost up to Rebecca's chin. They look like two stems of the same plant, wound together around each other at the top of our stairs.

IV. November

Tues 1st November

Just before bed, I cut two slices of bread and lay them side by side. I spread a generous layer of soya margarine on both slices and, instead of seasoning, I sprinkle each one with a thin layer of the powder from my special envelope. I'm careful not to use too much because of its strong metallic taste. I try to include a strong flavour in the sandwiches to cover up the sharp sting of the powder. In some of the sandwiches, I put slices of cheddar and tomato and a thin skim of Branston Pickle. Today I went shopping after school with our housekeeping money, so there are other, more interesting things to choose from for my own sandwiches, including processed cheese and chocolate spread. Helen will bring her empty box back for its refill tomorrow.

Wed 2nd November

'Are you allowed out on your own yet?' I ask, as Katie rewinds the video tape. We've just watched *The Way We Were* from Mrs Nelson's Barbara Streisand collection. Mr Phillips looks just like Robert Redford, but taller and more attractive because he hasn't got any warts on his face.

She glances at me warily. 'I'm not allowed over the other side of the creek without Mum or Dad.'

'I've got something to show you. On this side of the creek.'

The stitches have been removed from her forehead and the scar smiles at me enthusiastically. 'What is it?'

'It's a surprise I've been waiting to show you.'

'Give me a clue.'

I can see that she's consumed with curiosity.

'Your clue is called Helen Osborne.'

'Lizzie, would you give me a hand down here, please?' Mrs Nelson calls up the stairs.

'Can you come out tonight, after tea?' I maintain my mysterious tone as I lift the cushions to one side, clamber off the comfy chair and kick the dog out of the way. 'You have to wear black clothes, no bright colours.'

Katie opens the door the instant Mr Nelson's newly-installed security floodlight flashes on. I'm still at the top of the path, sailing through the floodlit gravel in my mother's black macintosh.

She dances around anxiously in the hall, full of apologies. Unfortunately, she explains, she can't locate any black clothes because she's not allowed to wear black. Her mum says black is the colour of Death. Her dad says teenage girls who wear black are stepping on the first rung of a slippery slope which ends up in a council house as a single parent in a broken home.

Katie's brain catches up with her mouth immediately after she says 'single parent,' but not before she says 'broken home.' Her lips form an o-shape and reach out, sucking the air, trying to pull the words back in.

Out of natural politeness, I pretend not to notice and allow Katie to steer away from the snag.

Luckily, she gabbles, she likes to wear rich colours, so she doesn't mind about the anti-black rule: she likes reds, plums, greens, cherises, whites, limes and oranges. She's listing.

She has tried the best she can this evening with her orchard of garments. She's wearing a fruity combination of purple and dark green, with fluffy chocolate legwarmers pulled up to her knees.

'Can I still come with you for the surprise?' she pleads.

I forgive her the white Nikes because our feet won't show.

She tugs a navy blue woolly hat over her head, carefully pulling it forward to cover the scar, and tucks her hair in at the sides.

'Take Trixy with you, girls,' Mrs Nelson calls.

'No dogs,' I whisper.

'No dogs,' Katie repeats to Mrs Nelson.

I quickly fill the gaping hole. 'We're just going over the road to play in my room, so I'm afraid the dog can't come.'

Katie's face lights up. She's never been in my bedroom.

'Not really,' I tell her.

Helen left number eleven a quarter of an hour ago, so by my reckoning we are currently in an optimum position to witness my sister's antics with *him*.

Mrs Phillips is never home on Wednesday evenings. I don't know where she goes. She leaves the baby and Samuel behind. Sometimes the baby wakes up

and screams at the top of its voice. Then he leaves my sister in the shop and goes through to the house to deal with it.

‘Where are we going?’ Katie asks excitedly as we set off up the road. ‘Not the church! I’m not going to the graveyard in the dark!’

‘We’re not going up there. You’ve got to calm down. Be very quiet.’ I speak in my deadly serious voice.

‘We’re not going nicking stuff are we?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Promise you’ll be silent when we get there.’

This is the first time I’ve shown anybody my secret, and I’m already regretting my decision to invite Katie along. I’d hoped, by doing so, to tug her away from her mistaken friendship with my sister. I hope, afterwards, she will realise how much trust I’ve conferred on her, how generous I am to share this secret with her.

I decide to have a quiet word with her before we get to the shop.

We stop in a doorway half-way up the road. ‘I’m showing you this because you are potentially my best friend at some point in the future.’

‘Thank you.’ She paws my arm.

‘What you see tonight: it’s top secret. You’re not allowed to tell anyone else, or you’ll get in big trouble.’

Jumping up and down with excitement, she sticks three stumpy fingers in my face while suffocating her little finger with her thumb. This is the brownie-guide sign. My concerns increase.

‘I won’t tell. I promise.’

Katie is acting as if she’s about to leapfrog out of our village and into the first page of a *Famous Five* adventure story, with me in the lead and the dog left at home.

We stop in the empty drive alongside the village shop. I tell her to wait quietly for a minute while I edge towards the window.

Behind the slanting blinds, the inside of the shop looks like a jewellery box gleaming with gems. All the tins and packets shimmer in the light.

‘There he is. Look!’

Katie creeps forward. ‘Who is it?’

Mr Phillips is moving about behind the counter.

‘What’s he doing?’ Katie whispers.

‘She’s there too. Look! They’re dancing.’ I can faintly make out the shape of my sister moving around on his side of the counter, but I can’t see exactly what she’s doing. All the layers of glass and the blinds inhibit my view.

‘What’s that Spanish dance called?’ Katie asks.

‘Flamingo,’ I reply.

Katie’s nose is pressed up against the shop window. ‘I think they’re doing Flamingo.’

Suddenly my sister surfaces. She runs through the hatch into the shop, laughing.

‘Quick, get back,’ I insist, and we both retreat into the drive. ‘Did you see her?’

‘Why’s she crying?’

‘She isn’t crying! She’s laughing.’

‘She *is* crying! Look! What’s she doing in the shop? Is that the secret?’

‘She comes here all the time,’ I explain. ‘To play with *him*. I’m the only one who knows about it.’

‘I hope he doesn’t try and teach me Flamingo.’ Her voice is adamant.

‘You’re not allowed to tell anyone, not even your mum and dad,’ I warn. ‘I’m waiting for the situation to *develop*. I’ll decide what to do next.’

We tiptoe forward again. Mr Phillips is moving into the shop, unwrapping something.

‘He’s giving her a present,’ Katie whispers. ‘No. It’s just a packet of hankies. She *was* crying. Did he hurt her?’

The unfurled paper tissue is so large it covers her entire hand. He wipes each hand thoroughly, pats her on the head, and sits down in the folding chair. She turns around in rapid circles on the spot. After a while, she walks slowly over to where he’s sitting. She doesn’t seem particularly enthusiastic, not like the other times I’ve seen them playing. He picks her up, puts her on his knee and wraps his arms around her middle, talking all the time. His mouth is huge like a goldfish when it comes up to eat flakes from the surface of the bowl.

A half-smile creeps across Helen’s face.

‘Look! See, I told you she wasn’t crying,’ I tell Katie.

Thurs 3rd November

‘At least we won’t get sand in our witches or sea in our sides!’ Rebecca hoots with laughter and unfurls the picnic rug, but I don’t think she’s at all funny. Not remotely. Her jokes are really pathetic.

‘It’s freezing out here.’

The wind tries to tear the rug out of her hands. ‘Quick! Put stones on the other side, Lizzie, before it blows away again.’

I have no problem finding stones because she’s brought us to a shingle beach. I group them together in the corners of the rug where they hunch like cold figures in pink, silver and grey.

Helen has already drifted down to the shoreline, where a minute sliver of anaemic sand glimmers hesitantly in the grey-white light. She leans on one of the tall wooden tide-breakers and examines the ground. Her bucket and spade look venomously yellow.

‘What a stupid idea for a birthday treat,’ I grumble, shifting around uncomfortably on the rug, trying to make the rocks underneath accommodate my shape.

A thin line of sea lurks on the horizon, almost as grey as the sky.

Rebecca has let us take the day off school for Helen’s birthday. Aside from us, the only figures on the shore are stray people walking their dogs.

The mudflats are dotted with fishermen digging for lugworms.

I decide to highlight an obvious fact to our mother, one which nobody has seen fit to mention until now. ‘People don’t go on picnics in November.’

‘Well, it’s Helen’s birthday and if this is what she wants to do, this is what we’ll do together.’ Rebecca takes our family-sized Thermos flask out of the hamper and waves it at me. ‘As a family. Have a cup of tea or something.’

On the shore, Helen chases a scruffy three-legged dog, trying to persuade it to drop its stick. She runs up to the owner with the dog at her heels and shouts, ‘what’s his name?’

‘Tripod.’

She laughs, and runs away calling the dog’s name, egging it on to follow her.

When she returns with the dog in tow, she shouts at the man, 'Yes, but what was he called before Tripod? When he had four legs?'

'Geraldine,' the man answers.

She screeches with laughter. 'Is he a girl, then?'

'I hope she washes her hands before eating any sandwiches,' I remark in a loud voice.

I muse for a while on the topic of sandwiches. To date, Helen has shown no visible signs of the effects of my powder in her packed lunches. I wonder if it isn't potent enough because I used Rebecca's old pills. I will use more powder from now on, maybe grind up some of our mother's new betablockers.

'Leave her alone. She'll be fine.'

'No wonder none of her friends wanted to come. It's freezing! I don't see why we need to come today seeing as we're going out tomorrow night for fireworks. I'd rather be at school.' I'm not going to sit quietly through my sister's selfish behaviour. Somebody needs to point out a few home truths. 'Why can't she do something normal, like go to the cinema? Look at her! What does she think she's doing?'

Helen has torn off her shoes and socks, and she's moving out over the mudflats like a crab. Bent low, black curls dancing around her head in the wind, she carefully inserts her spade into the mud, tilts the yellow handle and, with surgical precision, lifts the contents into the bucket.

'Do shut-up Lizzie. You're ruining this for everybody.'

As Helen gets older I find it more and more difficult to believe we're sisters. She becomes taller and skinnier, her hair grows curlier, and her absence of basic social skills becomes more pronounced, whereas I, by contrast, become more intelligent by the day, and my brown hair becomes straighter and sleeker.

I hate the cold. I stand up, rubbing the dents out of my legs. 'I don't see why I had to come out today.'

Rebecca tries to sip her tea, but the plastic beaker bounces around in the wind and she keeps getting mouthfuls of hair. 'Try to be nice to Helen today. It's a big deal reaching ten. It's the age when you start asking significant questions. And you start remembering things properly, connecting them in sequences rather than trying to put together all those vague impressions and fragments of infancy. Just think of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, the way she

changes.’ She sucks the rim of the cup and gazes into the distance. ‘For example, I bet you don’t remember that time when you were four, and you pushed Helen’s pram to the bottom of the garden and left her exposed in the sunshine. She was quite dehydrated by the time I found her.’

‘You’re always reminding me of that,’ I snap. ‘Of course I don’t remember, because it didn’t happen. You made it up. I remember everything else.’

‘Well, what about the way you used to follow your dad around all the time? You wouldn’t let him out of your sight. If he so much as went off to the loo, you’d howl inconsolably outside the door until he came out. Do you remember that? It made life very difficult for poor old me.’

‘Poor old you,’ I say sarcastically. ‘I wish you’d stop telling lies about me.’

I urgently need to get away from these unfair and incriminating reminders of a Lizzie who made decisions and embarked on plans of action, but who wasn’t actually *me*. Rebecca claims to remember a person with my name, but this person is out of my control. My mother has an unfair advantage. She can make up whatever stories she likes and, when I deny them she can tell me that I’m suffering from childhood amnesia.

I wander down to the shoreline before Rebecca can continue with her catalogue of false memories.

Helen’s shoes and socks lie abandoned on the sand beside a heap of cockle shells. I take off my trainers, position them side-by-side on the shore, and roll my trouser-legs up to the knees.

If you can join them, you can beat them.

Cold mud oozes between my toes and the wind inflates my jacket into a balloon. I stamp on lugworm casts and head towards my sister.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Saving lugworms from those men.’

‘Well I’ve got something to tell you.’

‘What?’

My sister is so gullible. You can say anything to her and she’ll always believe it.

‘Guess what?’

‘I don’t know. What?’

‘Dad went away because of you.’

‘No he didn’t. Mummy says he didn’t want to be married any more.’

‘Well, that’s not true. She only says that to make you feel better. He went away because you did something really bad. You probably don’t remember it any more because children your age forget things really quickly, especially the really bad things.’

‘But mummy said it was because of her, not me.’ She points at the windswept figure delving around in the picnic hamper on the shore, then she looks at me and her eyes widen. ‘What did I do?’

I try to think of the worst thing a little girl could do to her father. ‘You tried to stab him with the carving knife. He nearly died.’ I emphasise the last word, filling it with indignation and moral censure.

‘No I didn’t! I’m going to ask.’ Helen sets off for the shore, feet skidding in all directions, bucket slopping over.

I hurry to catch up. ‘It’s a secret. Promise not to tell her I told you?’

She stays silent.

‘If you tell her, you’ll be sent to prison.’

We get back to the rug.

‘Why did daddy go away?’ Helen asks our mother.

‘What? Is that what you two have been talking about?’

‘Was it *my* fault?’

‘No! Whatever gave you that idea?’ Rebecca glowers at me with a talk-to-you-later expression.

‘Come on! Let’s play the pebble game!’ I shout, feeling a bit guilty now.

I throw a grey-blue rock across the shingle as hard as I can. Helen runs off to retrieve it, nearly bumping into a couple walking their dog. She stands with them for a minute, talking and stroking the animal. The couple wave at us as they walk past.

‘Did you just tell her it was her fault he went away?’

‘No! She asked me. It must be in a book she’s reading.’

Flushed from running, Helen brings a pebble back. It’s definitely not the one I threw for her.

‘Did Lizzie just tell you something?’

Helen nods. ‘But it wasn’t my fault, was it?’

I throw the rock, but my sister isn't looking in the right direction. She's gazing at the couple with their dog.

'It's her birthday. Her special day.' Rebecca always takes Helen's side.

'I was only joking.'

When we get back to number eleven, Rebecca won't let me go up to the shop with Helen. She says I must leave my sister alone and stop *harassing* her.

'I don't believe the things you're capable of sometimes,' she snarls every time she looks in my direction.

In fact, Rebecca makes me feel so bad about my little joke at the beach that I feel duty-bound to make an effort with my sister this afternoon. So I help put icing and decorations on the birthday cake. The icing is delicious, with a squeeze of lemon juice to counteract the tooth-numbing sweetness of the sugar, and a circle of chocolate buttons around the outside edge. In the end, however, there aren't enough Smarties for a circle around the candles, so I scatter the remaining ones randomly over the top.

Helen comes back from the shop carrying a pink fluorescent water pistol. She stands in the kitchen. The pistol dangles listlessly by her side.

'Come on! Let's play Police and Thieves,' I say, pretending to be excited. 'I'll be the thief! Fill it up with water while I run into the garden and hide.'

'I don't want to play.'

My sister seemed quite happy in the car on the way back from the beach. She kept talking about the dog called Tripod, and the number of lugworms she rescued from the jaws of fate. She didn't seem to mind about my little joke. Now she looks miserable. I start to suspect that she's putting on an act in order to make me feel really bad in front of Rebecca. She knows I'm in trouble for my comments about dad. She can be cunning like that around grownups.

'Give it to me. I'll show you.' Given that it's cold weather, and that I'm allowing myself to be the thief on this occasion, I fill the barrel from the hot tap. 'Race you out there! Can't catch me!'

I run into the garden and wait expectantly by the shed.

Finally she pokes her nose out of the back door.

I'm starting to get bored with this game.

'Shoot me!' I shout.

'Why is ten *too old*?' she asks, not bothering to shoot.

‘What do you mean? Of course it’s not too old. Come on, shoot me!’

She gives a half-hearted squirt with the pistol, then turns and goes back indoors.

Sat 5th November

Every year, the bone factory throws its gates open for:

The Annual Bonfire Night Party!

Free to All Residents of The Village!!

Children Welcome!!!

No Dogs!!!!

A fortnight before the party, the official invitation always comes through our letterbox, embossed with a frame of stars and accompanied by an information leaflet, signed by the manager, about the benefits of British bone processing. It’s the same leaflet every year.

Heaps of branches bounce around precariously on top of the bone trucks as they trundle towards the village and turn onto the flat road. Out of my bedroom window, as I put the finishing touches to the voodoo doll I’ve been making, I watch the trucks disappear around the bend into the factory yard.

British Bone Processing is beneficial because it ensures that every part of a British Farm Animal is put to productive use. Processed bones are a central component in fertilisers for use on British Farms and glue for British Schools. Rendered bones have been used for centuries in the manufacture of essential items such as tallow and soap. Few of us know that the lard in our favourite cakes is made using Bone Rendering Processes (BRPs). The distinctive odorous emissions associated with bone processing contain no harmful toxins and do not affect children or animals. Fugitive emissions are tightly regulated and ambient odour levels are maintained throughout the year. The managers of the plant take Good Housekeeping very seriously!

Every year when our invitation comes through the letterbox, Rebecca gives her annual Bonfire Night speech. I call it her Bone-Fire Speech. The party, she says, is a cheap and shameless publicity stunt on the part of factory

management. It's designed to bribe residents into tolerating the stench that permeates their homes for the other 364 days of the year.

This year she says 'bribe.' Last year she used the more succulent word, 'seduce.' Bribe floats. Seduce drips and cuts.

Rebecca is a hypocrite, though, because every year she happily goes along to this shameless publicity stunt, eats at least six of the free baked potatoes filled with melted butter and cheese, drinks copious beakers of the free, piping hot punch, then stands in the crowd craning her neck, cooing 'ooh' and 'aaah' at the fireworks, even the miserable ones that fail to explode properly.

I always try to stand as far away from her as possible.

We wrap up in our warmest old coats and walk through the village together. I give my voodoo doll a little squeeze in my pocket, trying to avoid the pins sticking out of its torso. The thud of music coming from the other side of the creek pulses in my stomach with a soft boom.

Rebecca's wellington boots are covered with creek mud from my last bottle-hunting trip a few weeks ago. The wellies slap against her legs as she strides along the road.

'Come on, girls, hurry up!' she keeps saying.

Parents push wide-eyed toddlers down the hill in prams, or drag them along in harnesses. Everybody except us stops at the Mr Whippy van in the pub's empty car-park to buy ice-cream and toffee apples. Whenever cars try to get past, a reluctant channel opens up in this thick, sticky, licking human lava.

As we pass the pub, I fire a quick question at Rebecca in order to catch her full attention. 'Have you discovered any more interesting Edwardian poets recently?'

'Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I have.' Her face takes on a contented, far-away look as she starts to describe the work of a man called John Moray Stuart-Young, eighteen-eighty-one to nineteen-thirty-nine. I need to keep her talking because if the landlord of the pub chooses this moment to come outside and comment on all my trips to the bar with lists in Rebecca's handwriting giving me permission to obtain half-bottles of this and half-bottles of that on her behalf, then I will be under a great deal of pressure to come up with a believable story. I run through the options in my mind:

1. The poor disabled man with the walking frame gives me money from his pension to buy alcohol for him because he can't walk to the pub.

2. Mrs Nelson sends me down for cocktail ingredients.

None of this explains the signed notes in Rebecca's handwriting. I would be hard-pressed to explain myself if I get caught on this occasion.

Safely past the pub, at the bottom of the hill we merge with the families who flow out of the council estate and walk, shouting and laughing, towards the party.

An orange glow flickers on the other side of the creek. Violet and blue beams of light stream up from the factory, crossing over, dancing complex patterns in the sky.

'I hope nobody burgles us while we're out,' Rebecca comments in a loud voice, looking around suspiciously at members of the crowd we've just joined. 'Tonight would be a perfect night for it, with the whole family away from home.'

'But we haven't got anything to steal. Not even a telly worth nicking.' Helen matches Rebecca's pitch decibel-for-decibel. 'You can't beagle a house that hasn't got anything inside it!'

'Burgle!' I say.

'Actually, my collection of Edwardian poetry has become rather valuable over the years,' our mother says. 'As I've been telling Lizzie, my personal library takes a lot of effort and resources to maintain.' She describes the newest addition to her collection, a Stuart-Young book called *Minor Melodies* which cost £80 and took more than three years to locate.

Helen snorts.

My ears prick up. 'So how much are they worth exactly?' I ask.

'On a specialist market, rather a lot.' She smiles proudly at me.

'What do you mean by *specialist*? Where exactly would you sell them? Does *specialist* mean only one person is interested in the books, and that's you?' I can be quite droll at times.

'Oh, I'd never sell them! I don't know exactly how much they're worth. Thousands, probably. You can both find out when I die.'

The Nelsons navigate through the crowd in their white Cortina. I wave, but Mrs Nelson is too busy applying lipstick to see me. Katie looks like a nodding

dog in the back seat, looking out of the rear window, paws up in begging position, head swimming from side to side, hypnotised by the swell of people.

We turn onto the flat road and walk past the hidden entrance to my bottle-hunting territory. Helen keeps dragging her feet, looking over her shoulder back down the road, then scouring the crowd ahead of us. She's hardly said a word since yesterday.

Occasional gulls flash over our heads, their wings brief blades of light making incisions in the sky.

We pass the spot where Katie lost her handbag and purse, and I try not to look at the place where I hid the bag. I should have made more of an effort to retrieve it and dispose of it, but other projects took priority. I picture it lying half-buried in the sodden ground.

We turn the corner and arrive at the factory gates. A large banner, drizzled with fairy-lights, bawls 'welcome!' in enormous letters.

The factory yard echoes with laughter and chattering voices. Flames lick and spit through the base of a giant bonfire at the far end of the site, well away from the warehouses. A giant man is strapped to the top of the pyre in a chair. He sits, gazing out over the crowds. Laser-lights dance frantically along the grey corrugated length of the warehouse. A bouncy castle nearly the size of our house hums and wobbles, dwarfing the terraced row of Portaloos wafting disinfected signals through the crowd.

Up by the main gates, Katie Nelson's pit has been fenced off and covered with tarpaulin. Men in fluorescent jackets stand at each corner to ward off the children.

'It should be an especially impressive fireworks display this year,' our mother says, 'to compensate for what happened to Katie.'

'Hello Rebecca,' Mrs Nelson walks with tiny footsteps over to where our mother stands. Mr Nelson follows in her wake. His arm is slung casually around Katie's shoulders. Katie smiles contentedly. She's wearing a turquoise winter coat with a fluffy collar, and her head bobs out of the top like a buoy on the creek.

Mrs Nelson is wearing a beautiful coat the colour of fire which shimmers and flashes under the lights in the factory yard. I stroke the coat admiringly. She feels like a giant teddybear. I want to rub my cheek along her upper arm. Even in

the darkness, the fur shines as if expensive hair conditioner has been massaged into its roots.

Helen mutters something about murdered animals and moves away to stand on the far side of our group. She can be extremely rude. That's why our dad held Polite Parties, in an attempt to nip attitudes like this in the blossom before they flowered. I try to cover up for my sister's antisocial behaviour by wrapping a tight string of compliments around Mrs Nelson's lovely coat. Beaming at me, she explains that she's painted her fingernails a matching colour, and her boots are the same shade of fox-fur red. She holds out a row of trembling fingers, and a pointed toe peeps out beneath the hem of her coat. But the bone yard is too dark to see how carefully she's coordinated her footwear this evening. I pretend I can see it. I tell her she looks like Barbara Streisand.

Examining her own fingers, Rebecca wonders how Mrs Nelson manages to keep her nails in such good condition without chipping them.

In spite of her coat, you can tell Mrs Nelson's still cold because her hands are trembling and she keeps rubbing them together.

While Mrs Nelson tells Rebecca to eat two cubes of raw jelly every day, to avoid gardening, and to have a regular cuticle routine, Katie detaches from her father and drifts over to Helen. I move towards them. We stand huddled for a moment and then move purposefully away from our parents.

'Be careful!' Mr Nelson calls. 'You three stick together.'

When we get over to the bouncy castle, Katie immediately starts to kick off her Nikes, but I've spotted two of Those Three Girls from my class deliberately using the other children as landing pads. They haven't spotted me yet. I know they'll be delighted at the arrival of my softflesh body.

Backing away as slowly and discreetly as possible, I explain to my sister that Katie and I are far too mature for children's fairground games. She will have to go on the bouncy castle alone if she wants to play with all the kids.

'I will then.' She stares out into the crowd for a fraction of a second, then her shoes join the heap of footwear at the entrance to the castle and she leaps into the spaghetti bolognese of arms and legs.

Helen has lost a great deal of respect for others since her birthday last Thursday. Her old quiet demeanour has been replaced by a brand new attitude. I'm suspicious.

Katie gazes at the bouncy castle.

'You stay there and watch until I get back,' I instruct her, wrapping my fingers around the voodoo doll.

'Where are you going?'

'To the toilet. Won't be long.'

I leave her fidgeting with her shoes and start to stride purposefully towards the Portaloos, then I veer away and walk through the crowd towards the fire.

The guy waits patiently for the flames to reach him at the top, but the rest of the fire is burning so fiercely that onlookers have been forced to move back several yards. Their faces flash orange and white.

As I approach the base of the fire, a man with a fluorescent yellow jacket and Steward written on his arm rushes forward and says, 'Woe there, young lady! Back you go, love, for your own safety.'

I act as if I'm searching for something on the ground. 'I lost my pocket money somewhere down here.'

'Well, you shouldn't of been up here in the first place,' he says.

I stare at his face. What an insolent man.

'Just let me look,' I plead. Simultaneously, at top speed I grab the voodoo doll out of my pocket, throw it in the flames and run off.

'What you got there? A firework?' the man bawls. 'Get away from here right now!'

Heart racing in panic but safely back in the crowd, I chant my curse, trying to activate it: make her leave *him* and *him* love me.

Using jetsam and flotsam thrown up by the tide, I tried to create an accurate version of Mrs Phillips. The head was an old ping-pong ball I found on the seawall, cracked and stained yellow. The body and legs were easy: I simply snapped some wedges off a sodden piece of driftwood, took them home, dried them on my radiator and then bound them together using string and glue. I laughed when I did this because Mrs Phillips has got tree-trunk legs in real life. For her frizzy orange hair I used fine copper wire from the cupboard under the stairs, piercing the ping-pong ball with a pin and carefully sliding each length of wire into the hole before fixing it in place with a dollop of Uhu. The head had quite a lot of bald patches in the end because Rebecca's wire ran out. For the

eyes, I stuck on two rusty discs I found in the boatyard. One was larger than the other, but that also added to the authenticity of my creation because she has got misshapen eyes in real life. The freckles were easy. I sat at my table and jabbed the ping-pong ball with one of the Magic Markers Rebecca uses to cross-out her book plans. For the stomach, I wrapped the doll's body with cotton wool and bound the misshapen padding into place with a frayed bandage from the first-aid kit under the sink. A quick swipe of Uhu, and my creation was complete. For good measure, I stuck pins through the padding at the front and back, and chanted my curse over and over and over again.

But this aggressive Steward man and all these noisy people haven't provided the serious environment I imagined for my ceremony. While they burnt Guy Fawkes on top of the fire, I was supposed to compose myself, summon my powers and chant the incantation to activate my own figure at the bottom of the pyre.

I hurry back towards the Portaloos. Katie will be looking for me by now, and I want her to see me return from the right direction. I walk sideways in jerks, like a crab on the mudflats so none of Those Three Girls can sneak up on me from behind.

Half-way along the warehouse wall, I catch a glimpse of my sister disappearing into the crowd, and I halt. She reappears with a handful of somebody's coat in her fist, pulling it towards her with all her strength, as if she's in a tug of war.

When the coat emerges from the crowd, I see that it belongs to *him*. I can't hear what he's saying, but his mouth is moving and he's shaking his arm violently up and down, then side to side. Finally he dislodges her and she falls back against the wall. He points his forefinger in my sister's face, and wags it directly at her nose for about ten seconds, then he stretches out his entire hand like the stop sign they showed us in Cycling Proficiency lessons. Helen bolts away, mouth wide open. He walks back into the crowd.

I can't move. *He* never gets angry. My sister must've done something really terrible to cause this terrifying reaction. When I find my sister's Real Diary, I'll discover exactly what happened tonight and learn from it, so that when I'm with him, I can make sure there are no incidents like this. When he's married to me, he'll smile all the time. I'll make sure of that.

Heart pounding, I return to the bouncy castle.

Katie isn't standing where I left her. Mr and Mrs Nelson will be furious with me if she's wandered off. I scan the crowd for her turquoise coat. Everything has gone wrong tonight. It has been a disaster for me.

As I turn back towards the bouncy castle, I spot the flapping tongues of Katie's Nikes on top of the shoe pile. She isn't hard to find after that. In spite of all her recent injuries, she's tumbling sideways, screaming, staggering around gleefully inside, pushing people as hard as they are pushing her.

When the fireworks start, Katie decides to stop playing. I've been hovering around impatiently on the edge of the crowd for ages, waiting for her to come down from the castle.

'Why didn't you do as I told you?' I demand as we walk back to our parents.

'It was boring. You were gone *hours*. Where's Helen?'

'Didn't you see her get off? Didn't she say anything?'

'She just went.'

Rebecca stands with her old donkey-jacket hanging wide open and her feet splayed, craning her neck. She holds a beaker of punch in one hand and, in the other, a baked potato wrapped in a paper napkin. Grease glistens on her fingers.

'Where's Helen?' she asks, spitting pellets of potato at me.

'Here somewhere,' I say. Until I have processed what I saw, I'm not in a position to repeat any of it to members of the public.

Mrs Nelson is hilarious. The fireworks make her shout 'aaah!' and 'ooh!' and stagger backwards, laughing, into Mr Nelson's body. When she steadies herself, Katie nuzzles into her coat. Mrs Nelson presses her back into Mr Nelson's chest and wraps her arms round Katie. The three of them watch the fireworks, sardined together in a single warm parcel.

Helen emerges from the crowd at the end of the display and we walk back to number eleven. I can't believe how moody she's become in the last few days. The only person who seems happy tonight is Rebecca, who chats and hums and chuckles all the way home.

Mon 7th November

I tiptoe over to my bedroom door, ease it open and press my ear against the crack, poised for information.

‘They didn’t get my point. Or rather, they refused to get it.’ Rebecca’s voice is cracked and weary. ‘To be honest, the whole thing was a complete disaster.’

After a seven-second pause which I count on my fingers, she says, ‘very aggressive.’ Straightaway she adds, ‘Professor Aitkens was the worst. You know what he asked me?’ She adopts a posh accent. ‘*But what is the literary value of your research? How can you justify this study of crap poetry?*’ You should have seen the way he smirked when he said it in his Oxbridge accent. *Crap poetry.*’

She pauses for a while, then shouts, ‘snobs! Who does he think he is? I don’t care if he is chairing the selection panel. I told him straight out, these *crap* poems are an ordinary man’s efforts at literary expression, written in a spirit of sincerity. I said we can learn a great deal from the Edwardians. You know what he did next?’

A fraction of a second passes.

‘He said “sincerity,” “purity” and “expression” very slowly in a deadpan voice. Then suddenly his face broke into a gigantic grin and he laughed out loud. And his laughter was so infectious it spread through the entire place until, from where I was standing, they were all laughing at me.’

After about four seconds, she says, ‘I’m not exaggerating. It *was* as bad as that.’ Then she adds, ‘they’ll be laughing on the other side of their faces when my book comes out.’

As the phone-call draws to a close, she complains about how much preparation she has to do for classes, how she’s forced to cover for people on leave, how this involves so much extra work she never gets time to finish her manuscript. I’ve heard all this before. And then she tells the person on the other end of the line that my dad hasn’t sent any maintenance money again.

Even though Rebecca’s numerous phone conversations are one of my main sources of information about our family, I wish she wouldn’t discuss the private financial affairs of our family like this with other people.

The phone pings indignantly when she replaces the receiver.

The study door slams.

The whole house is silent.

Helen's room is suspiciously quiet. I wonder whether she's been listening to Rebecca's phone call, too, or whether she exploited the opportunity to creep out of number eleven when my guard was down.

I barge into her room.

My sister's hunched on all fours on the carpet, staring intently at a length of fine green wire in her left hand.

'We've got to be more helpful,' I tell her, 'round the house.'

She tries to balance a miniscule flowerhead on one end of the wire. A tube of Uhu oozes into the carpet beside her; the whole room is full of its acrid smell.

'Knock before you come in! I nearly tore it.' She examines the paper flower with concern and then lays it tenderly on the carpet beside the others.

'We've got to be more helpful round the house. Didn't you hear her on the phone just now?'

'I've been doing this.' Helen holds up the bunch of flowers for my inspection. 'I'm making her an all-seasons posy so she'll feel happy for the whole year.'

She shows me the flowers. I suppose they're a passable effort. She's tried to capture the detail of a wide range of flowers: a poppy with wide, lazy petals and a peppercorn seed capsule; a tight yellow rose bud with petals clenched defensively; a floppy michaelmas daisy in lavender blue; a burgundy tulip beaming enthusiastically on top of its stalk. The biggest failure in the bunch is the lonely daffodil. Its head is too heavy for the stem, so it droops and gazes miserably at the floor.

My nose tingles from the smell. 'Flowers stinking of glue won't help Rebecca. We need to sort out who does what round the house. Let's make a contract.' I look around her room for a piece of writing paper, but apart from flimsy tissue-paper Helen's only contact with paper is when she sticks those pieces of litter in her diary and decorates them with felt-tipped pens.

'What's a contract?'

'It's like the Copycat Rules, when you sign an agreement with me and I witness it.'

I fetch two sheets of cartridge paper, a calligraphy pen and a bottle of ink from my bedroom. As I return to her room, the phone rings again. Rebecca starts to retell her story to the new caller.

I wade through the debris and sit on Helen's bed. Using a traditional copperplate script, I draw up two identical agreements and distribute household tasks between us.

'I'll carry on cooking tea when she's too tired to do it, and I'll keep buying all the bits and pieces we need from the shop. You'll be responsible for washing-up every night, by which I mean every *night*. Not the next morning. And you'll vacuum-clean the house once a week on Saturdays. You'll need to focus on your housework on Saturdays.'

'Okay.' She signs the contract. I'd expected her to make more fuss, or at least try to negotiate with me, especially over the vacuum-cleaning on Saturdays.

'I'll supervise all the household decisions from now on,' I say as I kick through the tissue paper and plant pots and head for the door. She still doesn't challenge me. She hasn't got a clue.

Fri 11th November

I make sure that I buy just one item at a time, peas one day, fish-fingers the next. This maximises my time with *him*. I've also been cooking especially sticky things on Monday and Wednesday nights, using as many pans as possible so Helen takes an eternity to complete the washing up and can't perform her after-dinner vanishing act. She hasn't been going out at all on those nights.

I think I've got everybody in exactly the right place at long last, apart from Mrs Phillips.

Sat 12th November

My body lies in the bathtub with *me* trapped inside. The glands ache in my armpits. Nothing is flat, or still, or smooth any more. My body insists on growing

up, oozing, sprouting hairs, and I haven't been able to do a single thing about it till now.

I've seen Rebecca change the blade on the Stanley knife once or twice, but this blade is different: it's paper-thin, with a strange misshapen hole in the middle. I jiggle it around on the stem of the razor, holding the loose section over the top, hoping all the pieces will snap into place and stay put, but the whole contraption falls apart in my hands.

The mirror is cloaked with a protective layer of steam. In the corner, an old 'H' slowly becomes visible in the steam, inscribed with a fingertip a long time ago.

An article in Katie's *My Guy* said you're supposed to soak the razor in warm water before using it, to *soften* the blade, so I remove the tiny blade from the rest of the razor and drop it into the bath. It sinks. When I try to pick it up five minutes later, it speeds along the bottom of the bath like a stingray. In the end, I bind my fingers in my face flannel and carefully lever it up.

Now that I've got a rough idea of where each piece fits, and how to tighten the whole contraption in the middle, the razor is quite easy to assemble.

It's not my legs I'm worried about, but I decide to start with my legs in order to learn a method.

I can't turn back the clock. But I'm not going to lie here and let all these changes take place without my permission.

I sit up, lift my leg, position the razor on the fleshy calf and drag it down as gently as possible. The blade scrapes my skin, rasping. Tiny spots of blood appear, swelling, poised to fall. I rub soap on my leg to make the surface slippery. Now the blade skates smoothly over the surface, cleaning away all the hair.

I have perfected my method.

I kneel and create a creamy film of soap all over my groin.

Suddenly the door handle rattles and a voice interrupts my concentration. 'Let me in! I need a pee. Please let me in!'

'Go away. You'll have to wait.'

'Please let me in! You've been *hours*.'

'No. Piss off!'

I'm at a delicate stage of my operation. A lot of concentration is required. I continue, trying to ignore the noise, but after a few minutes Helen's pathetic griping turns into a persistent knocking and whinging at the door.

Covered in soap, I lever my body out of the bath, grab a towel and splash across the floor leaving puddles of water in which I hope she breaks her neck.

'Hurry up then.'

She bolts inside, trousers and knickers already at half-mast, to dispense a noisy, relieved pee. She even does a little fart at the end.

'Kindly cease your *fugitive emissions*,' I say, imitating our mother's voice.

She gets off the loo and pulls up her knickers with an uppity flourish.

That's when I see what she's wearing. Brand new Mr Men knickers.

'Where did you get *those*?'

Rebecca never buys new clothes for one of us and not the other. She's quite fair in that respect, and I haven't been on the receiving end of any new knickers recently.

'I got them in a shop with my own money,' Helen says defiantly, rolling her eyes to the right, where they land on our mother's open razor box.

'Where did you buy them then?'

After a pause, she says, 'Boots.'

'Liar! They don't sell clothes in Boots. Everyone knows that. Who did you get them off?'

I'm holding the towel away from my front in a hoop, like a circus clown's trousers, to protect the lather. Soap dribbles down my legs.

A little cavity has appeared in her mouth as she probes the empty razor box. 'What are you doing?'

'None of your business.'

'I'm telling Mum on you.'

'Who gave you those knickers?' Holding the top of my towel together with one hand, I move towards her menacingly and she makes a hasty exit. I lock the door again, drop the towel, and climb back into the bath. I lie in it for ages, bubbling with fury. I don't like discovering this kind of evidence.

Mon 14th November

I've been sitting in my favourite place, at the bend in the seawall just before the creek opens out into the estuary, with the sea in the distance. There's a wrecked barge here, ribs sticking out of the mud, and a sheltered spot where I can tuck myself into a shallow basin out of the wind.

Not a single truck trundled up the flat road today. The only sounds have been the piercing cries of the oyster catchers and the mewing of gulls wheeling over the receding water.

Nobody was out here.

I'll forge a sick note from Rebecca to hand in at the secretary's office if I decide to go in tomorrow. I might even use her fountain pen for extra authenticity.

Dad used to bring me here. We'd huddle together for hours playing I-spy, or he would point at boats and birds until I shivered so much we'd have to go home. Helen always tried to come along too, but she would whinge and cry all the way out and all the way back, stealing Dad's eyes away from me.

Today was windy and cold, and I had to evict sheep from my hollow when I arrived. At least it wasn't raining.

I watched the creek as the tide moved through the wreck. I could almost feel the mud and the water probing the wood.

For the last week or so, I've had the sensation that I am floating outside myself. Whenever I try to focus on somebody, my brain rocks backwards in a somersault and the person drifts away. Last night at dinner, Rebecca and Helen were tiny speck-people sitting at the far end of the kitchen table. I could hardly see their faces in the distance, and their voices were like echoes.

Maybe I need glasses.

Maybe I need a piece of string to attach me to the world, like a balloon. I don't want to blow away.

At four o'clock I wander back towards the village. The grass on the seawall crunches stiffly under my feet. I feel exhausted as I walk up the hill.

At the Nelsons' front door I can hear Helen and Katie screeching and crashing around upstairs.

The frantic yapping of the dog gets louder as Mrs Nelson opens the front door. 'Why weren't you on the bus tonight with Katie?' she asks in a screechy

voice, and ushers me in. The house throws a blanket of warmth around my shoulders.

Tues 15th November

The outside of Helen's bedroom door is plastered with posters depicting terrible scenes of pain and cruelty: live rabbits with ears pinned back and thick needles sticking out of their necks. Monkeys with wires protruding from their open brains. Dogs in pain, cats in pain, white rats and mice in pain.

All of them have terrified eyes.

Her door is the first thing I see every morning when I emerge from my bedroom, and it's the last thing I see every night.

Sometimes I can hear the monkeys screaming in my dreams.

Fri 18th November

It's hard to ignore what's happening at number eleven.

Rebecca watches like a hungry dog when Helen eats. I've never seen our mother so alert. She even keeps her glasses clean to help her see more clearly. Helen's got two people watching her closely now.

The way Helen picks at her food is more annoying than ever. Every night as we eat dinner, Rebecca gazes unhappily at my sister and my sister stares moodily at the table, biting the dry skin around the edges of her nails. Herself: that's the only thing she'll eat in the evenings. But I'm pleased to say that, in spite of the outbreak of diarrhoea and vomiting among the kids in her class, she continues to bring back an *empty lunchbox* from school on weekdays.

Tonight, at the Nelsons' house, Helen and Katie put on thick layers of lipstick, eyeliner and mascara. Katie looked like a miniature version of Mrs Nelson. But my sister's only ten. That's far too young. Our mother should put a stop to it. Clearly my sister's trying to make herself look grownup and attractive for *him*. But behind that makeup her eyes have sunk like pebbles in her face.

She's started to look like one of the dead relatives Rebecca's got hanging in the study, fading off the paper in the sunlight.

I'll never wear make-up. This is my one and only bone of contention with Mrs Nelson, even though Mrs Nelson thinks I might be encouraged to relax a little if I am given the right kind of *products*.

I laugh, because inside my head I just cracked a really funny joke. Now that most of her plants are dead, Helen is using her unemployed trowel to put on her makeup. I might tell that one to Katie some time.

Mrs Nelson says my sister has an *attention-seeking personality*, and I agree with this. It's probably brought on by a very early onset of hormonal change. She says the best thing to do with young ladies who have disorders of this type is ignore their behaviour. Then they will snap out of it. The worst thing a mother could do, she says pointedly, is pander to the attention-seeker's every last whim.

'Just ignore it,' Mrs Nelson tells me. 'Act normally. Your sister's trying to manipulate your Mum. And it's clearly working!'

I think it's time Helen *snapped out of it*. We shouldn't be forced to tolerate this self-centred behaviour every night at the dinner table. Rebecca rarely bothers to look in my direction when I speak. Nobody responds if I try to start a conversation with my family.

Tonight Mrs Nelson made me a special cocktail called White Russian. I don't usually drink milk, but this was sweet and delicious with a sting. It tasted like a really good breakfast cereal. We lined up bottles and Waterford Crystal Stemware. Mrs Nelson's teaching me all about cocktails. She says vodka is the base ingredient for many different types of cocktail, and that if you put good quality vodka in the freezer, it'll never turn to ice. I engaged her in a detailed conversation on this topic and successfully drew her attention away from other subjects.

I've secretly adopted Mrs Nelson as my mum. She doesn't know yet. I've written up all the paperwork in Gothic Script and used sealing wax to cement the contract.

At breakfast, Helen refuses to eat anything except orange flavoured vitamin pills and the occasional small bowl of muesli if she's ravenous. But apart

from her permanent scowl and sulk, I still haven't spotted any side-effects from my special powder.

Our mother replaces our out-of-date vitamins with a fresh tube of pills. When I see the new ones, I laugh because they are the size of small biscuits. When my sister takes a tablet out of the tube, she holds it in her bony fingers and gnaws around the edges with her front teeth. She looks like a hamster. All the time, she peeps out annoyingly from under her curls. She doesn't have a hamster-ward of tablets in her bedroom, though, because I would have found it by now.

Sat 19th November

'Come on, eat your dinner! I made these nut cutlets specially for you.'

I look up in surprise. Our mother rarely uses this tone of voice, impatient and firm. While I cooked proper sausages tonight, she prepared a stupid vegetarian dish for my sister.

'I spoke to the nurse at work about you,' Rebecca continues, accusingly, 'and d'you know what she said?'

'I don't care what she said.'

'She said "*M-E-A-T*".'

'Me At?' enquires Helen.

I laugh at my sister's moderately funny comment.

Rebecca tries to change her tone and sound affable, but she does it with all her usual lack of talent. With a false laugh, she says, 'Yes, *me at* the end of my tether! So you'd better eat your dinner now, Helen, or I'll be forced to feed you steak and kidney pies until you put on a bit of *me at*!'

Helen's expression is scathing but I can't see her eyes very well, because her lids are weighed down with black eye-liner and mascara that's congealed into clumps.

I decide to maintain the jovial tone and insert some real humour, just to annoy my sister and to show Rebecca an example of a successful joke. I unfurl the comment I've been keeping up my sleeve like a handkerchief, waiting for the

appropriate occasion. ‘Do all vegetarians use *trowels* to put on make-up like you?’ I ask, ‘or is it just the ones who like gardening?’

While I’m chuckling, my sister continues to look at our mother coldly.

‘Do shut up, Lizzie,’ Rebecca says.

I can’t break them up.

‘Why don’t they experiment on farm animals?’ I ask in a polite, conversational tone designed to cause maximum irritation to my sister. I chop meaningfully at my sausage. ‘They should experiment on pigs and cows and sheep,’ I say, holding up an inch-long wedge of the greasy brown meat. ‘The animals we eat for dinner. Then *people* wouldn’t complain so much.’

‘Shut up!’ Rebecca bellows at me.

The atmosphere at their end of the table buzzes with something alive and raw.

All her life, Helen has avoided eating meat. It was one of the things our parents argued about. Personally I agreed with Dad, who said children need meat for healthy bones, to feed the brain, and you can see the living proof of how right he was if you compare Helen with me. But Rebecca said children have the right to exercise freedom of choice on *ethical matters* such as food and religion.

Dad always stood over my sister at mealtimes, making her chew and swallow. When she put meat in her mouth, she wouldn’t let it touch her teeth. She’d chew as little as possible, then take big gulps of orange squash to wash it down.

The minute he left number eleven, she laid down her serrated knife for ever. I think she was pleased he disappeared.

‘They shouldn’t experiment on animals at all,’ she remarks primly, pursing her lips, balancing a carrot upright on her plate before toppling it with her finger. ‘They should experiment on pathetic people like *you*, Lizzie.’

‘There’s no need to be offensive,’ Rebecca says, tucking a handful of hair behind her ear and bringing her knife and fork together on the plate. An untouched sausage lies on it, glistening. Her hair falls forward again, grey and dead.

‘You’re lucky anybody speaks to you at all. You are so pathetic,’ Helen tells me as she pushes her chair back and walks away from the meal.

Now I'm in a dilemma. Helen disappears down the corridor and slams the front door behind her. I can't follow her because we're only half-way through dinner. Strictly speaking, according to the Rules, my sister should remain here in the house to do the washing-up, as we agreed in the contract she signed. But she's become extremely disobedient recently, showing a flagrant disregard for the most basic of our Rules.

Rebecca heaves a sigh. 'I'm not hungry either, now.' She reaches for her cigarettes. 'I really don't know what's got into her recently.'

I decide to test the water and drop a hint about a certain person's secret friend just to see what our mother's reaction will be. 'I think she's got a friend who's encouraging her to be like this.'

Rebecca looks at the sausage on her plate, rubbing her arm thoughtfully.

I add carefully, 'She goes to see *him* all the time. She's probably up there now.'

Physically my mother is still sitting in her chair, but mentally she has retreated to another planet where she can't see or hear me properly. She lights a Marlboro and murmurs, 'I don't think she's old enough for that kind of thing yet, thank God.'

The smoke trembles as it drifts away from her. I reach over and spike the sausage from her plate and eat it with deliberate chews.

Tues 22nd November

Rebecca comes home early from work. She arrives at the Nelsons' house at almost four thirty and, with a determined look on her face, declares that she wishes to remove Helen from the television set and take her into town.

I don't mind, because I am engaged in a pleasant conversation with Mrs Nelson in the kitchen.

Rebecca is wearing her shabby brown cardigan. The pockets bulge with paper tissues, and the front hangs down six inches lower than the back. There's a hole in the elbow.

‘Me and Lizzie are setting the world to rights, aren’t we, love?’ Mrs Nelson tells Rebecca, lowering one of her twinkling silver-and-blue eyelids in my direction, giving me a fleshy wink.

Katie is busy upstairs with her homework. I know the dog is up there too because its collar makes a tinkling sound every time it scratches, and its hind-leg thuds on the floor.

Mrs Nelson and I have just prepared Real Martinis using gin, Vermouth, olives and ice. We’re celebrating the fact that this year has seen the appearance of not one, but *two* new James Bond movies, *Octopussy* and *Never Say Never Again*. We haven’t had the chance to say ‘chin-chin’ yet, so I’m relieved when Rebecca lets me know she doesn’t want to drag me into town as well as my sister.

But then, as she leads Helen away, Rebecca declares, ‘We’re off to do the shopping.’

We are all a bit suspicious, especially Helen, but I am livid. She never does the shopping on a weekday.

Helen protests all the way up the path.

‘What was that all about?’ Mrs Nelson muses as we sit back down on the new Habitat barstools with pictures of palm trees and sandy beach scenes on the seats. Mr Nelson assembled them from flatpacks at the weekend to replace the old pine stools.

I find it difficult to concentrate on what Mrs Nelson is saying. I hunch on the stool and chase my olive around the glass, trying to stab its slippery skin with my cocktail stick. Rebecca will spend *my* weekly housekeeping allowance if she does the shopping today, then I’ll have to use my own scarce resources if I want to see *him* in the shop between now and next Monday.

But to my immense relief, when they get back to number eleven an hour later and I go home, I discover they haven’t done any shopping at all. It was all an elaborate trick. Instead, when they arrived in town, Rebecca forced Helen into the Health Centre for an appointment with the doctor.

Our mother’s deceptive behaviour was triggered by a letter from Helen’s school. I’m furious when I find out what’s been going on. My sister has been handing out her sandwiches to children in her class every day. I’d like to give her

a piece of my mind. How ungrateful. She hasn't eaten her packed lunch for weeks. She's on hunger strike till she dies like Bobby Sands.

Now Helen's locked herself in the bathroom and won't come out. I'm desperate to go to the toilet. The pressure in my stomach has become intense and I'm not sure I can hold back for much longer. It's not a pee that I need.

'Darling, the doctor just wanted to give you a check-up and talk about your nutritional requirements as a vegetarian.' Rebecca stands next to me, addressing our side of the closed bathroom door.

'You can't force me to eat meat! You can't make me take medicines tested on animals!'

'Can't we get a toilet put in upstairs?' I beg, fidgeting, clamping my buttocks together as firmly as possible.

'Nobody's going to force you to do anything. You're looking so poorly at the moment, darling. We need to find out why.'

'I'm not poorly. Go away!'

'What happened to my little girl?'

'I'm not your little girl! I'll come out when I'm ready, and that's when you've all gone away.'

'But you haven't eaten anything for weeks. What's the matter, Helen? Has something happened?'

Our mother's questions are met with complete silence.

One central feature of my sister's personality has always been her selfishness, especially when other people need to use the limited bathroom facilities at number eleven. But usually she is a creep when around adults. Until now this has included our mother. This new razor-sharp sister, who shuts herself in the bathroom, storms away from the dinner table, and abuses our mother whenever she's asked to do the smallest things, has opened up a completely new tin of worms in our house. I've actually started to feel sorry for Rebecca.

Helen breaks her own silence. 'Go away and leave me alone!'

Rebecca moves away, muttering and sighing.

'Don't worry about me,' I shout. In pain, I hurry out of the back door and circle around the garden like a dog looking for the right spot.

Thurs 24th November

Until now, I've remained out on the seawall by the old barge. But this week the weather's turned really cold and rainy. Today I was shivering so much I had to return to number eleven before lunchtime, and reaching home involved running past all the neighbours' houses in the middle of the day.

Tomorrow I'm going to borrow Rebecca's old macintosh and umbrella. Then, if I feel brave enough to walk back through the village, I'll hide my head in the umbrella and make sure my legs stride confidently along the road looking like adult legs.

Just in case Katie tries to get me in trouble again by telling her mum I'm not on the bus after school, I've prepared a story for the Nelson household.

'I've joined the school choir,' I tell Mrs Nelson. 'We've started rehearsals for the Christmas play – *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*.'

Helen won't believe this because she knows I hate singing, but I don't care what she thinks. I need to persuade Mrs Nelson.

'Isn't it a bit late to start on the Christmas play?' Mrs Nelson puckers her forehead and gazes at me through watery eyes. 'If you start now, you'll never be ready by the end of term. You've only got a couple of weeks left!'

'Rehearsals will be very intensive,' I say. 'I need one-to-one coaching. I've been chosen to play Joseph. The other Joseph dropped out.'

'You're a girl!' snorts Mr Nelson, coming into the house through the connecting door to the garage, nudging past with oily hands, heading for the toilet.

I explain quietly to Mrs Nelson that my teacher says I have more than enough talent for this challenging role. 'All the individual training I'll be getting means I'll be arriving back in the village slightly earlier or later than the others on schooldays. Sometimes I might even be back at lunchtime. It's unpredictable, depending on my singing classes. If I get home early, I'll go straight to number eleven and continue my singing practice, then I'll come over to your house as usual after four o'clock.'

The school choir really is going to perform *Joseph*. The headmaster announced it in assembly at the start of term and encouraged everybody to audition for the show.

Mr Nelson stands in the hall with his back to me, zipping up his brown shiny jacket. He turns around and makes a funny shape with his mouth. He mumbles something.

‘Pardon, dear?’ Mrs Nelson asks.

‘*Joseph!* Hippy rubbish. Shouldn’t be encouraged at the grammar school.’ He pulls a packet of Benson and Hedges out of his pocket and slides a cigarette under his moustache.

‘Well, personally I’m delighted for you, Lizzie,’ Mrs Nelson says. ‘Come on, let’s have a little something to celebrate.’

Mr Nelson bangs the door behind him. His wiry silhouette hunches briefly outside the frosted glass, then he moves away.

We line up six crystal tumblers in the kitchen and pour a drop of liqueur into each one, using as many different drinks as we can find. Blue Curacao is my favourite one because of its intense, exotic colour.

Katie and Helen scamper around upstairs, squealing like rats. The dog is downstairs for once, staring at us, begging for crisps and peanuts.

Mrs Nelson pours bubbly wine into some of the glasses, creating a sticky fizz which we decorate with plastic mermaids in seaside colours and garnish with paper parasols. She shows me how to turn the blue liqueur green by pouring in just the right amount of orange juice. It tastes delicious! I can’t believe the magical way the drink changes colour. After that, we experiment with Blue Curacao and different soft drinks, trying to find other perfect colours. Most of our experiments turn muddy brown. But they still taste delicious.

‘Now, sing!’ Mrs Nelson taps the top of her glass with her diamond ring, and a note chimes out. ‘La!’ she calls.

‘*Jacob!*’ I sing, trying to hit the right note. ‘*Jacob and sons!*’

‘Very good.’ She takes a gulp from her glass, and taps it again, producing a new note.

‘*I close my eyes,*’ I sing operatically, eyes closed, trying not to ruin the notes by laughing. ‘*Pull back the curtain.*’

We carry on until she finishes her drink. But when I see Mrs Nelson's hand reach out to grab her bone china teacup from the cabinet, I take a few steps backwards. Luckily she moves away and decides to rap her diamond ring against other things instead, like the radiator in the hall and the frosted glass panel in the front door until we are laughing so much I can hardly stand up.

Katie and Helen have gone silent upstairs.

Mrs Nelson slumps against the wall. Her eyes fill with tears. I hope she doesn't start crying. 'Fuck it!' she says miserably.

'Your chunky gold chain would look lovely with that top,' I say, trying to take her mind off whatever has upset her.

'Chunky chain?' She fishes around, trying to remember it.

'The one he got you on Valentine's Day.'

'Oh yes! Shame. Got broken.'

I wonder how those thick links could have broken. Maybe it wasn't such good quality after all? I hope Mrs Nelson won't mind that I didn't manage to finish all my different drinks tonight. I wonder if Dad will bring me a gold chain when he comes home. I wonder what I should make for tea tonight. I hum a little tune. I don't feel very hungry now.

Sat 26th November

I hold the biro lightly and try to concentrate on the form of her words, their shape and texture, how they look.

When she writes 'hold,' the o looks like a microscopic snail lost among tall trees.

Given the ongoing absence of the Real Diary, my writing sample is the False Diary, borrowed from her room. Copying out the entries feels strange because, as I write, her words try to become mine. They fix on me like leeches and sink their suckers in. I don't want her to get under my skin. I want to make her go as far away as possible.

Her new signature's stupid: it's a big loop, followed by a straight line. She thinks it looks grownup to have a signature where you can't decipher the name.

I'm worried that it will take too long to master her new handwriting. Just a few weeks ago, I was able to write her name on the walls without any problem. But this new writing bursts into different styles without warning. She's so unformed. So shapeless. I have to keep practising. I need to be able to write it fluently before February so I can put my new plan in action.

Wed 30th November

Katie Nelson rings our door bell before school. She smiles and holds out a tall box wrapped in silver and pink spotted paper. Her face is bright orange all over, especially her forehead, but her neck looks normal up to the jawbone.

I don't want to be too friendly in case she gets the wrong idea.

Her cheeks are rosettes of pink. She looks like a fairy from a children's story, about to grant me a wish.

I wish she'd stop beaming at me with those fluorescent teeth.

I take the present with as much cold dignity as I can muster, and stare at her in an unwelcoming way. She's just showing-off, standing there on our doorstep to show she's remembered my birthday.

I knew she'd do something like this in a bid to wriggle her way back into my favour. She wants to be my friend again now she's getting bored with Helen's sulky behaviour. It's also obvious that she's giving me this present to try to force me to get her a nice Christmas present. I can see through her strategy, and it won't work with me.

A birthday card and present from my dad arrived in the post this morning. I caught a brief glimpse of the postman's fingertips as they released the envelopes, then withdrew into the outside world. Paper sailed onto the doormat in a flurry of brown and white. Dad sent me a beautiful Swatch. I can see all the inner cogs on display through the glass, ticking and moving in intricate patterns. The stamp was a picture of the Queen, stuck on upside down, but the postmark was smudged.

I stared at the envelope for ages before opening it. I can recognise his handwriting a hundred miles away. But his writing's become more real to me

than the rest of him. I can't remember his eyes any more, or his voice, or his laugh, or how he says my name.

'It's from Mum and me,' Katie says, panting with enthusiasm, ignoring my silence. Her hand moves towards me, clutching the large parcel. 'I chose it specially. Come round later if you like.'

'Yeah, maybe,' I say. But I have other plans for later, and I close the door in Katie's face.

Poised in an elegant pirouette, her chin slightly raised, she gazes away from me into the distance, across the creek, into the open sky beyond the bone factory. Her graceful hands are clasped together above her head. Her fingers are hooked in exquisite arcs. She stands on my bedroom floor, more beautiful than ever now that she's mine.

I examine her fingers, one by one. They are so tiny and delicate, fragile and perfect. Minute dots of glitter sparkle on her porcelain ballet skirts.

Beside her, the wrapping paper lies carefully folded on the floor so I can use it again.

This is the best birthday present anybody has ever given me. Part of me would really like to say thank you to Katie. But I don't see how I can go about doing that without giving the impression I would like to be her best friend. I don't want to sit in Katie Nelson's bedroom surrounded by all her glossy Habitat furniture, playing records and cassettes on her shiny new stereo. I don't want to talk about boys. I don't want to talk about school to remind me of Those Three Girls. I don't want to talk about clothes and make-up. Actually, I'm far too busy with all my own projects for such nonsense.

After three attempts at composing a thank you letter, I give up and sneak over to Helen's room to listen at the door. I can hear rustling noises inside. Good.

Ten minutes before we're due to set off for school, I creep out of the door and hurry up the road.

Helen runs after me, appearing from nowhere, insisting on coming too.

'You can't come. Go home!' I shoo her away, but she tags along, carefully staying an arm's length behind.

All morning, she's tried to be nice to me, smiling and chatting about my birthday presents. We all got up at six thirty so I could open my presents before

school. But I know the real reason my sister follows me up the road: it's because records show that she's barely seen *him* at all since her birthday. Clearly, she wants to prevent *him* from spending any time alone with me. It's to stop our relationship from developing.

Mr Phillips fills bags with sweets and passes them over the counter to me, singing 'Happy Birthday' at the top of his voice. I'm not really into sweets any more, but I take the bag to humour him. His singing is so off-key that I put my hands over my ears, laughing, begging him to stop. He doesn't shut up until Mrs Phillips storms down the corridor, arms wrapped around the howling baby, and tells us all to keep the noise down.

I look for something to nick from the shop.

Mr Phillips adopts a gloomy expression. 'Mademoiselle de l'Osborne! Please take a long hard look at yourself in the mirror and reflect upon the situation.' His voice is hilariously solemn, filled with despair. But what he says next stops my smile in its tracks.

'Dear, dear, dear! Soon you'll be going out with boys, then you'll be off to university. This really is terrible! What shall we do with you?'

'I *hate* boys,' I say fiercely. How could he be so insensitive?

Helen grinds the heel of her shoe into the chequered lino, and gazes at him with a sullen expression. She remains completely silent. It's very unlikely that she understands references like *university*.

'What balderdash and tosh you speak, mademoiselle!' Mr Phillips says. 'How can you hate boys? We're lovely, aren't we Irene?'

Mrs Phillips stands in the doorway with a down-turned mouth. Their new baby has grown to the size of a large bag of King Edwards. 'Have you asked her yet?'

'Asked me what?' I ask suspiciously.

'Excuse me, Mrs P! I was just coming to that! Actually, mademoiselle, I do have a cunning plan up my sleeve which I'd like to share with you, and now seems as good a time as any to discuss it, if you can spare a moment of your precious time before going to school.'

But his voice has changed now Mrs Phillips is trying to elbow in on our conversation. He sounds more like a boring grownup than my magical man. If

his plan is so cunning, why's he going to tell it to me in front of Mrs Phillips and my sister?

But his eyes still sparkle with the playfulness I love.

'Now you've reached such a ripe young age, perhaps you'd like to earn a little income by babysitting for us once a week? I know you mentioned it recently. It would be fantastic if you could. We've hardly been out since we had baby George.'

'Since we had Sammy, actually,' Mrs Phillips interrupts.

Helen bristles. I can almost hear her bones splintering with envy.

Mrs Phillips emerges fully from the corridor. She stands beside *him*. 'Do you think you'd be okay to look after George and Sammy? We'd always leave a phone number, of course.'

I stay silent.

When she adds that I won't need to worry about walking home in the dark afterwards because *he* will always accompany me back to number eleven, that seals the deal and closes negotiations as far as I'm concerned. I agree, triumphantly, to the arrangement.

'And what remuneration will a young lady of your social standing expect for her babysitting services?' he asks.

'We'll pay you a pound an hour,' Mrs Phillips says. I was just about to tell them my rate of seventy-five pence per hour.

Samuel lurches out of the corridor, slug-trails coming out of his nose, reaching his arms up to Mrs Phillips. She waddles around the shop with flushed cheeks, the sleeping baby in her arms, hair loose and frizzy on her shoulders. She's searching the shelves for something.

Helen scowls at Mr Phillips.

He's barely even looked in my sister's direction. It's my special day. Everything has changed for the better.

Samuel starts to grizzle by the biscuit shelf.

Mrs Phillips grabs a pink beaded purse off the toy shelf, and Mr Phillips tucks a five pound note into it when she's not looking. I can feel Helen's scowl deepening. The purse is quite pretty, even though it's meant for nine-year-olds.

Looking at Mrs Phillips's pink freckly face and ginger eyebrows, framed by her frizzy red hair, I decide she looks more like a farmyard pig than ever

before. She's so cumbersome and red, always complaining about something. But Mr Phillips obviously really likes me. I'm surprised and pleased to be asked to babysit. His request circles me like a warm embrace. I could never have anticipated such a pleasant birthday gift. As it dawns on me that he has cleverly disguised his love for me as this invitation to babysit, all my recent doubts and suspicions evaporate. *He* wants to see me more often. Not only that: he's also managed to persuade Mrs Phillips, and he's shown my sister publicly that he likes me the most.

Tipsy with happiness, I stammer my thanks.

As we leave the shop, I slip a jar of Shippams salmon paste into my pocket.

Walking back to number eleven with Helen trailing behind, I realise that, without any planning or action on my part, I have finally gained access to the magical world behind the shop counter. I start to swagger, dangling my beaded purse by the clasp, knowing Helen's staring at me bitterly.

'Mrs Phillips looks obese. It's disgusting,' I remark as Rebecca drives me into town. I have decided to attend school today just in case anybody's bought me a birthday present. We've posted Helen into the village school.

'Do you think I should try to make spaghetti tonight with that horrid TVP stuff?' Rebecca asks, frowning at herself in the rear-view mirror.

'Really. She's fat like a pig,' I say.

'Or shall I try to make those vegan sausage things again? The ones which fell apart in the frying pan. Which tasted better to you?'

V. December

Thurs 1st December

'You ok, pet? You look a bit ... *peaky*,' Mrs Nelson says when she lets me in this evening.

A wall of warmth rushes forward and strikes my face when she opens the door. All the Christmas decorations jangle in the hall, dancing around in the breeze.

'I'm fine, thank you,' I say, un-hunching my shoulders, sighing with relief, kicking off my shoes on the mat and putting my schoolbag on the peg above the warm radiator.

'Look at the state of you! You're soaking wet! Where're you having these rehearsals? The playing-field?'

I try to keep my coat on, but Mrs Nelson makes me remove it. The next layer is wet, too. My nose melts into a stream. She digs in her handbag and holds out a hanky covered with lipstick kisses, and I dab my face with fingers too numb to locate the tip of my nose.

The terrier won't stop sniffing my shoes, wagging its stump, making excited ruffing noises at the array of outdoors scents I've brought in from the seawall. Every time Mrs Nelson tells it to leave my shoes alone, it sneaks back to them, crawling along the carpet towards me, inhaling and exhaling rapidly.

It was impossible to stay warm by the creek today because of the drizzle and icy wind. By one o'clock, my fingers had turned white and my toes were numb. By two o'clock my hands were paralysed and I couldn't unscrew the lid of the half-bottle of vodka I bought from the pub. Even my bones shivered inside my flesh. In desperation I walked back to the boatyard, searching for an unlocked yacht to shelter in, but I was too nervous to walk up and down the jetties testing the hatches, looking like a thief, so I hid for the rest of the day behind the hull of a boat in dry dock.

After I've changed into one of Katie's fluffy bathrobes and put on a pair of pink slippers, Mrs Nelson invites me to try out the new sofa which arrived today. Even though the last one was quite new, it got damaged. She didn't want it any more and threw it out.

The new sofa is the size of a barge. It's made from thick, velvet-type fabric decorated with huge purple and orange whorls which clap against each other on a background of dark brown and emerald green. Flecks of yellow and red flash

across the fabric. All these colours harmonise beautifully with the carpet and with all the pictures of exotic birds that soar across the walls. The sofa is so soft that when I sit down my legs leave the floor with a jolt. Mrs Nelson screams as I nearly spill my Baileys Irish Cream on the fabric.

As I get comfortable in this nest, I notice that Mrs Nelson's special bone china teacup and saucer aren't in their usual place.

'Where are they?'

She sips her peppermint cocktail, purses her lips, and looks away.

Fri 2nd December

'Helen!' I bawl up the stairs, 'dinner's ready.'

'I'm not hungry!' Helen calls back.

'Tell her she's got to eat something,' Rebecca instructs me.

'You've still got to do the washing-up,' I shout.

Sat 3rd December

I have high standards for friendship. I don't let anybody come along and try to get close. But since Katie Nelson gave me that birthday present, I've realised that she's not as horrible as I thought. I'm also pleased to note that she's altogether more *mature* than she used to be, especially now she's stopped hanging around with my sister all the time. I have decided to set her a Friendship Test. If she passes, I will consider the possibility of something more cordial.

I ring on the bell and the national anthem resounds through the house. Behind the frosted glass, a fat rectangle of white leaps about, yapping hysterically. A pale blue figure wobbles into view. Fingers take shape, reaching towards the handle.

'I was wondering, can Katie come into town with me today?' I ask.

The dog pants, pink tongue flapping in and out.

Mrs Nelson sways gently to and fro, as if she's still behind the frosted glass. A bubble of spit froths out of the corner of her mouth.

I have my pocket money in my jeans pockets, but I don't plan to spend it. I've got other plans.

Every Saturday I put my two pound coins into my moneybox. I was really upset when pound coins started to replace pound notes back in March because it meant I couldn't make a fat bale out of my pocket money any more. Now I get Rebecca to hang onto pound notes whenever she gets hold of them, and I swap them for pound coins from my tin. You can roll pound notes up into a wad, then you can sit on your bedroom floor and peel them off, one by one.

In my other front pocket, and in both back pockets, I've got rubber bands of different lengths.

'Of course! How lovely! You two girls out shopping together!' Mrs Nelson says. Each exclamation comes out slightly shriller than the last. She gazes at me with an expression of such complete adoration that I tingle from the roots of my hair right down to the tips of my toes.

'Katie,' she calls, turning around, but Katie's here already, beaming at me.

I wish Katie wouldn't come so close. Every time I go over to number sixteen, she hurtles down the stairs, lurching at me with her lips pulled back and those white teeth getting bigger and bigger. I suppose she thinks she's smiling. Her skin looks smooth, like plastic. She smells so sweet that I have to take shallow breaths and turn my nose away. She sticks her eyelashes together in wedges using Mrs Nelson's mascara.

Mrs Nelson gives us a lift into town because she's got one or two bits of shopping to do. She goes up to her bedroom just before we set off and weaves her way back down the stairs smelling strongly of Chanel No.5.

'Seeing as I missed your birthday,' I tell Katie when we're in the car, 'I thought we could go and choose something for you today.'

I haven't lied to her.

'You are such a sweet girl!' says Mrs Nelson, and her eyes give me a Melting Look in the rear-view mirror.

Katie bears her teeth at me and fidgets with her new Burberry handbag, pulling out her purse and checking it. She gets five pounds pocket money a week, which is more than twice what I get from Rebecca. I observe that there are two five-pound notes curled up together in her purse.

Mrs Nelson drops us in the town centre, and gives us two pounds for the taxi fare home. I put the coins in my pocket.

‘Have fun, girls! Don’t be naughty!’ she calls, turning up the car stereo as she drives away.

Bach blasts out. I know this music is Bach because our mother often plays it when she’s in the study. But Mrs Nelson’s version sounds far nicer than Rebecca’s boring harpsichord music, which just goes plonk-plink-plonk. Mrs Nelson’s cassette tape has a wealth of wonderful additional sounds, with electric violins and trumpets swelling and fading emotionally.

A new Miss Selfridge has opened in town, next to Top Shop. After sharing a greasy sausage roll from the bakery, which Katie buys, we go in. We pick clothes off the rails while David Bowie sings ‘Let’s Dance’ in the background. There are lots of lovely things: tight t-shirts in pastel colours, white puffy-sleeved blouses, big leather belts, salmon pink kick-pleat skirts, black pencil skirts and drain-pipe jeans. Shopping with Katie is more fun than I thought, although when she tries to break-dance to Michael Jackson’s ‘Thriller,’ I realise that she’s still very immature compared to me.

Katie is a size twelve, but she hasn’t got much of a bust.

I’m what Mrs Nelson calls ‘size gorgeous,’ which is just a little bit bigger all over than Katie. Mrs Nelson says size gorgeous girls remain lovely all their lives. They don’t age rapidly like the scrawny ones who abuse their bodies with food fads like vegetarianism and look wrinkly and used-up by the time they’re twenty-one.

Then Katie sees the red dress made out of stretchy cotton, with a deep v-neck, a tight waist and full skirt. She tries it on, and dances round the changing-room singing ‘Lady in Red’ in a completely out-of-tune voice, skipping over all the discarded clothes, arms raised over her head.

She’s clearly in love with this dress, even though it doesn’t fit very well. Her stomach looks lumpy in it, and the v-neck flaps emptily.

‘It really suits you,’ I say.

Katie is worried about the price, because it’s fifteen pounds. She knows I can’t afford that much, but she really wants the dress. She offers to contribute the two five-pound notes from her purse and says we can run over to Nelson’s Eye to get the additional money from her dad. He’ll give it to her from the till.

‘Go and distract them,’ I tell her.

‘What?’

‘Don’t be stupid. Go through there and distract them.’ I point out of the changing-room, where the assistants hover like wasps.

‘No, Lizzie. We mustn’t.’ She is taking off the dress as if it’s infected with a deadly disease.

‘Put on that kick-pleat skirt and that white top, and get back in the shop,’ I command.

‘Then what?’

‘Honestly! Make something up! Go and ask them if it suits you. Tell them to give you other things to try on.’

She tiptoes out of the changing room as if she’s walking on broken glass. After a while, I hear her asking advice from the assistants. Her voice trembles. She sounds like she’s confessing to a Terrible Crime. But after a while, she seems to manage to involve them in swapping shoes and jackets for other colours and sizes.

I kneel inside the changing room and roll the dress into a tight bundle. I bind it with rubber bands and stuff it in the back of my jeans. I tie my jacket round my waist by the arms to stop the bump looking too suspicious at the back, then saunter out of the changing room into the shop. Katie is in the process of squeezing into a white leather jacket.

It’s hard to breathe.

‘That looks really nice, but it’s quite expensive. Why don’t you go away and think about it?’ I say to Katie in a loud voice. ‘Then you can make up your mind which one to get.’

‘Oh, okay,’ she replies stiffly. She scrutinises my body.

While she changes back into her clothes, I browse through the items on the circular rail in the middle of the shop. I try to make sure I’m always facing the assistants so they don’t see my bulges. I hold up garments with a critical expression on my face.

‘Hurry up!’ I call.

When she finally emerges, Katie’s face is yellowish-white, with huge scarlet patches over her neck and cheeks.

‘You look a bit ill,’ I say, loudly. ‘Why don’t you go and wait for me outside?’

The shop assistants exchange a glance and move towards the door.

Katie stumbles out of the shop. No alarm bells go off.

They focus on me.

To resolve this situation, I randomly select a pair of earrings which cost £1.99, take them to the till, and struggle to dig in my pocket for the taxi fare Mrs Nelson gave us. My jeans are so tight, now, that I can hardly fit my hand in the pocket, and the arms of my jacket get in the way. I drag the coins out.

‘Thanks,’ I say, taking the bag and moving towards the exit.

No alarm goes off at the door. Outside, I walk casually for eight or nine steps, then start to run, shouting to Katie to follow as I disappear down the street.

We sprint away, rounding the corner past Woolworths, past Nelson’s Eye, across the car park to the bench outside the public toilets. We don’t look back.

At the toilets we stop, gasping for breath, and look round nervously.

‘What are you two young ladies up to, then, looking so mischievous?’

Mr Phillips has emerged from nowhere, dragging his grizzling toddler by the arm and carrying a large Boots bag. I feel my cheeks turning scarlet.

‘Nothing,’ Katie says.

‘It doesn’t look like *nothing*.’

I can’t speak. It’s so wonderful to see him, but terrible, too. When he looks at me, I want to swoon forward into his strong arms.

The rubber bands around the dress are digging into the flesh of my back, and my spine feels like it’s going to split from the pressure.

‘Mr Phillips, I don’t suppose you could give us a lift home, could you?’ Katie asks.

‘No!’ I say. ‘We can walk.’ I don’t want *him* to find out what we’ve been up to.

‘Of course, girls. Are you going back now?’

‘Yes please.’ Katie drags me along by the arm.

The car stinks of baby. I sit in the front passenger seat, trying not to inhale the cabbagy nappy smells. Samuel babbles happily in the back.

‘Boo!’ Katie calls out to him from between her fingers. ‘Hello! What’s your name?’

He screeches and giggles.

‘Peekaboo!’ she calls, imitating his giggle and peeping out from behind her hands again.

She entertains him all the way home. Everything in the back seat gets covered in a film of spit.

As *he* changes gear, the flesh covering his knuckles tightens and relaxes. When *he* takes his hand off the gear stick, he places it on his left knee. It’s ever so close to my right knee. Almost imperceptibly, he stretches his little finger towards me. In reply, I stretch my little finger towards him. We point secretly at each other all the way home.

Mon 5th December

Our doorbell works on a coil. It must be wound up in order to function, but not too tightly or it won’t work at all. We know when the coil is loose because the only noise you can hear is a butterfly flapping in a jar.

The butterfly flaps lamely. I open the door.

‘Yes?’ I ask politely.

‘Hello!’ A wrinkled, suntanned man stands on our doorstep, wearing a wide-rimmed hat, a dark overcoat and unfashionable glasses. The skin on his chin is brown and deeply lined. So is the skin on his cheeks. The nose of a red car peeps out behind him.

‘Rebecca isn’t here. You’ll have to come back another time.’

He looks very disappointed. ‘Just thought I’d drop by.’

Instead of turning away, the man stares at me as if he’s trying to eat me with his eyes. His breath wafts warmly over me.

‘Try later maybe,’ I say as I close the door. My fingertips are tingling.

‘Who was that?’ Helen calls as I start to climb the stairs.

‘I don’t know. One of those Jehovah’s Witness men, probably.’

The butterfly flaps in its jar again. I open the door a crack.

‘When did Mummy—Mum—say she’d be back?’ he asks. ‘Lizzie? Can’t I come in?’

I’m rooted to the coconut doormat now. ‘She’s at the library.’

‘She doesn’t believe in Jehovah.’ Helen’s trying to look over my shoulder through the crack in the door. ‘Or God. And she says Jesus was just an ordinary man. So was Mohammed.’

It’s not like my sister to be assertive with strangers.

The man cranes his neck, trying to peer into the house, but I refuse to open the door more than a few inches.

‘Look at you!’ he suddenly explodes. ‘How are you both?’

I tighten my grip on the door knob. The way he speaks makes something shift around at the base of my stomach. I know who it is.

He always had a beard. That’s how I remember him. I try to imagine the beard back in place, superimposed over this one’s wrinkled brown chin, but this one has a wide, smiling mouth, not like the old mouth which he used to hide away.

I open the door.

‘Thanks.’ He looks around the hallway, smiling at the coats and the carpet. Even the old lampshade gets the same grin of recognition as the one he just gave me.

Slow on the take-up reel as ever, Helen finally asks, ‘Are you our daddy?’

‘Yes I am.’ He puts his hand on her shoulder. She freezes.

When he removes his hand, she scuttles away to the staircase. From there she examines him closely as if he’s one of her plant specimens. ‘I’ve never actually had a proper daddy,’ she finally announces.

‘Yes you have! Me! Don’t you remember me?’

She shakes her head and stares at him. ‘Sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t remember what you look like.’

‘She’s retarded. Don’t take any notice of her.’ I say. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

I always thought I’d be thrilled to see him and throw my arms round him at our reunion, but nothing about this one reminds me of my dad.

He sounds different. ‘Sure. Yes please.’

I follow him towards the kitchen. He isn't carrying armfuls of exotic presents. He stares at the walls, the ceilings, the carpet, craning his neck. His suntanned neck-flesh creases whenever he turns his head.

'Mum, is she okay? Still working on the same old book?' He laughs, but this time it isn't a proper laugh.

As we enter the kitchen, the front door opens.

'Who nicked my parking space? What's going on?' Rebecca strides up behind us, then halts in her tracks. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Hello! How are you?' He sounds a bit nervous.

'Well, what a surprise to see you after all this time.' Rebecca's voice sounds dangerous. 'How long would it be, now?' She narrows her eyes at him and dumps her bags on the floor. 'Let me see...' She pauses, counts her fingers, then holds out her palm. 'Nine thousand six hundred pounds, please.'

'Come on, don't be like that! Let's sit down and talk.'

But Rebecca doesn't want to come on or sit down or talk. 'You can't just arrive out of the blue and expect us to roll out the red carpet. Come back when it's convenient. Convenient for me, not you. And bring the money you owe your family.'

'It's okay,' I tell him loudly. 'We don't mind about money. Now *is* convenient.'

The tip of Helen's nose sticks through the kitchen doorway, then withdraws.

'What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were in Africa on a whistle-stop tour to halt the famine.'

'Don't be sarcastic. I came back. Couple of months ago.'

'You came back a *couple of months* ago, and you didn't come to see your girls?' Rebecca grabs her Marlboro out of her handbag. 'It's funny how you care so much about the starving millions, but nothing about the financial state of your own family.'

'I tried to visit. October time. Didn't get further than...' He shrugs. 'Lost my nerve. It's been such a long time.'

'I know how long it's been. Don't you have any idea how much it costs to keep two kids fed and watered?' She extends her palm again and waves it under his nose. She's acting as if we're animals.

I look down at my feet in shame. Rebecca is totally obsessed with money.

‘How much did you send? Go on. Tell your daughters how much money you sent to support them after you walked out.’

‘I was out of work a long time, then volunteering.’

‘A couple of quid, then nothing. That’s how much. I hope you’ve got a good job now.’

You can see from his face that this visit is not going according to plan.

He says, ‘I’m staying with some friends in town. As a matter of fact, I’m thinking about moving back into the area.’

‘Good. Then you can phone up next time before you visit. Arrange it in advance. If there is a next time now you know how much money you’ll be bringing when you come.’

Desperate measures are required. Rebecca is turning my dad’s much anticipated homecoming into a Terrible Disaster. She should be pleased to see him. She should make him feel welcome so he’ll come back to live at number eleven. Instead, she is trying her hardest to make him disappear again.

‘Don’t go, Dad! Come and see my bedroom.’ I pull him by the arm, and try to lead him up the stairs.

‘No, really, I’d better go.’

‘But I want to show you my bottle collection.’ I want to seal him inside the house and put a stopper in the top.

As he opens the front door and steps outside, he says, ‘did you say bottles? What a funny thing to collect.’

‘When are you coming back?’

He shrugs. ‘I’ll let you know. In advance.’ He sighs as he leaves, and draws a hand over the ghost of his beard.

Rebecca starts sobbing in the kitchen.

‘Why is it funny to collect bottles?’ Helen asks as we stand at the living-room window and watch the red car drive away.

Tues 6th December

A lone figure struggles along the path towards me, pastel pink overcoat flapping wildly in the wind. An inside-out umbrella tugs to and fro behind the figure, and a blob of white zigzags around its ankles like a piece of litter.

By the time I realise who this is, it's too late to run away. Anyway, there's nowhere to hide out here on the mudflats and marshes. I hunch down as low as possible in the hollow.

Gulls try to fly forward along the creek, out to sea, but the wind pushes them back.

Closer and closer she comes, taking tiny steps, slipping and sliding in the mud.

I've been here most of the day, tucked away in my special place with my A4 pad and biros.

Yapping enthusiastically, the dog bounces up, trying to lick my face.

The figure falls over, and a faint screech drifts my way. I crouch down even further, trying to conceal my shape in the bank. But I know my number's up.

Finally, she stands directly above me on the seawall. Her hair is a tangled mess, and I can hear her gasping for breath, almost crying. 'So then, young lady, is this what you call *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*? Why aren't you at school?'

Her white stilettos are plastered with mud. She leans forward, trying to stop her heels sinking into the path, but her knees buckle in her pencil skirt.

I'll have to think fast.

'Don't think I haven't seen you sneaking round the village at funny times of day. That's Lizzie, I keep saying to myself when I look out the window. But there you are, every night, round our house after school, telling me us about your *rehearsals*.' Her face is purple. 'No, that can't be Lizzie Osborne, I say to myself. Just some scum off the council estate, skiving off school.' The inside-out umbrella bobs behind her like a dead jellyfish rolling in the tide. 'But this morning I watched you sneak down the road and run through the boatyard. I don't like sneaky people who tell lies. Especially little girls.'

I am caught between the Devil's Rock and the hard place at the bottom of the Deep Blue Sea. I can see from her expression that if I don't tell her the truth,

I will be in real trouble. But if she forces me to go back to school, Those Three Girls will be waiting for me in the playground. I will have to put my fate in her hands.

I say simply, 'I'm in trouble at school.'

She pulls a plastic Sainsburys bag out of her coat pocket and tries to spread it on the ground to sit down, but it blows away.

I stand up and support her elbow to stop her falling over again.

'Tell me! It'd better be good!'

I try to describe the behaviour of Those Three Girls at school, how they won't stop following me around shouting repulsive things in my ears. But as I speak, my words get tangled up. To my horror, I start to cry uncontrollably. I'm terrified she won't believe me, but I find it impossible to make sense. My mouth's all tangled up and I can't make any story come out.

To my amazement, Mrs Nelson acts as if she's understood every word I said. 'Why haven't you told your mum about all this?'

I reply with my mother's reply. 'She said sticks and stones will hurt my bones, but words...'

Mrs Nelson rolls her eyes. 'Now! Give me their names! I'll go down the school and sort those girls out.'

'No!'

'Why not?'

'You'll make things worse.'

'I will not!' she replies, giving the dog's lead an indignant tug with one hand, removing her other hand from around my shoulder and looking away.

We stand quietly for a while, buffeted by the wind. I don't know what to say next.

Mrs Nelson looks at the seawall, the grasses, the wet kelp in the mud, the sheep, and the creek. Slowly, her nose turns purple.

Finally she says, 'it's horrible out here. Ugly. Outdoors. What do you *do* with yourself all day?'

'Not much.' I pull my notebook out of my bag and hand it to her. The wind tugs each damp page over, and Mrs Nelson scrutinises my writing. I've been writing a story in Gothic Script about a lonely old man, set at Christmas time.

‘Oh dear,’ she says, puckering her lips and trying to hold the volume at arm’s length. ‘I can’t read your writing at all.’

‘It should be in proper ink, but I use biro when I’m out here because ink bottles fall over in the grass.’

‘Now then, young lady, give me the names of these three girls, or I’ll report you to the authorities,’ she says, closing my notebook with a smack.

I have no option but to spill all the beans and pulses.

She nods once, twice, three times. ‘Right! Leave this with me.’

Fri 9th December

Mrs Phillips is very reluctant to leave the house. She fiddles with the washing-up and tidies up the children’s toys, all the time telling me where she’s put spare bottles of milk for George, and how to calm Samuel if he wakes up.

When she pauses in her fussing, *he* tries to manoeuvre her out of the back door, but I can hear her nagging and griping all the way down the road to the pub.

They write the pub’s phone number on a scrap of paper, but I’m reluctant to call under any circumstances. I don’t want the Landlord to recognise my voice and strike up a conversation with them about all my purchases from the bar.

One of the most important Rules to remember, especially if you live in a village like ours, is that you mustn’t let too much information about yourself leak out and flow between different groups of people. Grownups in particular should be kept in separate enclosures and fed with different information because they like adding-up: two plus one always equals three for them, as I’ve discovered on occasions that I’d rather not think about again.

Mrs Phillips leaves a tray heaped with treats for me on the coffee table in the living room: chocolate bars, packets of crisps, bottles of fizzy drinks, packets of biscuits. It’s difficult to get through all this stuff in a single evening, so I put the leftovers in my bag. She probably thinks I’ll be nicer to the kids if she bribes me with these tasty snacks, but I haven’t had to face that challenge tonight because neither Samuel nor George wakes up while I’m here.

A gutter drips loudly outside the back door, making a steady, unnerving sound, like footsteps.

I eye the shelves, trying to work out what belongs to her and what belong to *him*. The cuckoo clock over the fireplace is definitely *his* because it is complex and elegant, as is the beautiful painting of a sunset behind a smouldering volcano. But the ugly glass doorstep with a preserved dandelion head inside is definitely hers.

What I find almost impossible to bear is Mrs Phillips's ignorance about how much I love *him*. I suffer all this secret pain because of *him*, yet she is completely oblivious. She carries on without a care in the world. Recently, I've found that I can't even look at her when she talks to me. If I catch an accidental glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye, I feel sick. She's one of my heaviest obstacles. My voodoo strategy clearly failed. I can easily persuade *him* to drop Helen if she tries to worm her way back in. Anybody can see I'm superior to my sister. I have been designing a plan of action for February in order to get rid of this annoying and persistent ginger woman as well.

Wandering through their house this evening, I stop in the doorway of George's room and look at him lying on his back, fast asleep, blankets kicked sideways, fingers curled over, plump and pink, cheeks glowing. He looks happy and peaceful. When I peep round Samuel's door, the bedroom heaves with the shapes of toys and books, all lit by the glow of the bedside lamp. The boy lies in the middle of this paradise, breathing in and out noisily. Neither child wakes up.

In order to understand *him* from the inside, I tape some LPs that are stacked on a shelf in the living room. When I get home, I'll sneak into Rebecca's study and listen to the lyrics of these albums for musical clues about his personality. Personally, I prefer Katie Nelson's choice of music these days, especially Kajagoogoo and Duran-Duran. I like their songs, although I'll never be as pathetic as Katie who's got pin-ups on the wall behind her bed.

Looking through the LPs on their living room shelf, I realise that my musical tastes will certainly need to change when I'm married to *him*.

When they come home, Mrs Phillips rushes upstairs to check on George. She'll soon realise I'm trustworthy, and she'll grow a lot more relaxed. I aim to become a regular fixture in the house at the back of the shop so they'll feel confident to go out for four or five hours at a time. Or more.

Fri 16th December

At a quarter past eight tonight, a burst of coughing upstairs turns into sob. With alarming speed, the sob turns into an undulating wail like the siren we sometimes hear echoing over the marshes.

I close the drawer I've been rifling through and hurry upstairs, worried there will be a domino effect. Pram-dwellers are similar to dogs. I know this from observation in town. If a baby opens its mouth and starts to howl, there is an immediate chain-reaction. All the others follow suit until the entire non-speaking population has turned into a solid wall of noise. They have no idea why they're crying so nobody can offer them any comfort.

I peep round the bedroom door, realising, as I do so, that Samuel has no idea who I am. He's only seen me once or twice in the village shop, plus that time Mr Phillips kindly gave me and Katie a lift home. Generally, on all such occasions, we've given each other a wide berth. Now I'm blocking the entrance to his bedroom and when he looks up he'll see a total stranger.

He's in the process of trying to climb out of bed, legs tangled up in the eiderdown. When he sees me he freezes.

His wail turns into a scream. 'Mummy!'

'I'm Lizzie!' I say in my friendliest voice. I need to shut him up before he wakes the baby. 'Let's go downstairs. Choccy biccies!'

As with dogs, the only way to the heart of a small child is through an appeal to its appetite.

Samuel struggles and screams hysterically in my ear when I try to pick him up. I bundle him downstairs, into the living room. The cat flees its place on the sofa as the howling, writhing mass enters the room.

He won't even take hold of the biscuit I offer, let alone start to eat it. He kicks me violently.

'Mmm! Yummy-yummy!' I shout, noisily stuffing the biscuit in my mouth to show him how tasty it is.

'Mummy! Mummy!' he bawls.

I carry him through to the kitchen, trying to put as much distance as possible between him and baby George upstairs. The cat looks at us in alarm and disappears through the cat-flap.

I tell Samuel about all the chocolates I've got for him, but I have to shout to be heard above the racket. As a result, I probably sound a little bit less of my friendly self than usual.

Samuel only knows one word.

'She isn't coming home till later.' I shake my head at him. 'No mummy! No, no, no! Big fat mummy's gone away!'

I will not let this boy get his way. He will have to learn who is boss here.

I put him on the kitchen floor and sit on a chair staring at him severely.

After about three quarters of an hour, we're both completely exhausted. His face is purple, and his mouth is a trembling crater inhaling and exhaling streams of spit. But he seems to have realised I'm not going to kill him, much as I'd like to. He has also learnt a useful Lesson to remember for future reference: he will never win a battle of wills against a person like me.

He finally takes the biscuit and holds it miserably, waving it in the air like a flag of surrender. His hands are so hot the chocolate melts all over his fingers. By the time I carry him upstairs and put him back in bed, there are smeary chocolate streaks all over his blue pyjamas.

'How was everything?' Mrs Phillips asks when they arrive home.

I'm exhausted.

'Sammy coughed a bit,' I say. 'I gave him a biscuit, but apart from that everything was fine.'

Mon 19th December

I can see that Katie appreciates the honour I am bestowing upon her, because she pushes people out of the way in order to get to the front of the bus and rushes up the road, eager not to lose a precious minute of her allotted time. Afterwards we'll retire to number sixteen for our usual after-school snacks and drinks. I don't want to miss tonight's delicious cocktail.

The whole idea occurred to me during the bus journey home. Since my encounter with Mrs Nelson on the seawall, Katie has been on permanent lookout to make sure nothing else happens with Those Three Girls at school. If there's any trouble, she has to go and find a prefect to tell one of the teachers. Those Three Girls will be suspended if they bully me again. Tonight, by inviting Katie round to see my room at number eleven, I'll be able to subtly let her know she's making substantial progress towards becoming my potential friend. But I'll never pick up my knife and fork and eat humble pie in front of her.

Helen is forbidden from joining me and Katie.

'Go straight up the road,' I instruct my sister, 'and tell Mrs Nelson we'll be there in exactly thirty minutes.'

'Do this. Do that. Yes ma'am,' Helen mutters as she bangs the door behind her.

As Katie and I hover in the hallway, I realise that there's nothing in the house to offer her, not even a bag of crisps. Worst of all, I've made no plans for how to keep track of my sister's whereabouts during Katie's visit. Helen could be sailing freely past the Nelsons' house at this very moment, up the road to see *him*.

I'm annoyed with Katie for letting me invite her round.

'Quickly phone your mum. Tell her Helen's on her way and we'll be there in half an hour.'

Katie laughs when she sees our grey plastic phone screwed to the wall with its circular, rotating dial. The Nelsons' downstairs phone has a keypad for swift dialling and a very long flex. Mrs Nelson tucks the receiver under her chin and walks all round the house during her conversations.

'Did you make sure Helen got in?' I ask when she gets off the phone.

'That's all fine with Mum. Helen's there now.'

'Just put your stuff here,' I say, throwing my schoolbag and coat on the floor. Only now do I notice how seriously Helen's been neglecting her cleaning duties recently. Balls of dust huff up in the draft when I drop my things.

'Haven't you got a spare hanger for this?' Katie asks meekly, sliding out of her Laura Ashley coat and eyeing the mound of shabby outdoor garments clinging to the wall. I can't remember what the pegs look like underneath all the coats.

If she continues to criticise our house, we will go straight back outside and she will never be allowed back in. This kind of behaviour is typical of only children.

I try not to sound irritated. 'Put it over the banister, or on top of my coat.'

She puts it on the banister.

As we climb the stairs, I notice how frayed the carpet's become, and how scuffed and chipped the gloss paint looks all the way along the skirting-boards.

Katie stands in my bedroom doorway with a confused expression on her face. She turns in circles as she enters, as if she's searching for something.

Finally, she focuses on the neat row of sealing-wax sticks on my mantelpiece.

'Everything's really old-fashioned and funny in here apart from those crayons.'

I walk over to the Exhibition Area on my mantelpiece and pick up the ancient sealing ring Dad gave me, engraved with an antelope leaping elegantly through the air. 'This is a Roman Centurion's seal. It's over two thousand years old.'

The antelope is suspended, mid-air. He's disappeared from one place, but hasn't yet landed in his destination. He's caught between two worlds.

Katie wanders away to the table by my window. She picks up a calligraphy quill. 'It's like a museum in here!' she says, flourishing the feather.

'I've got twenty-eight different nibs,' I explain, walking over. 'They're arranged in size order at the front of the table. Those are my Winsor and Newton coloured inks at the back. I keep my black ink, cartridge paper, pencils and ruler on this side. When I finish a bottle of ink, I bury it in the garden for somebody to find in a hundred years' time.'

'Haven't you got a stereo?' she interrupts.

'I've got a radio so I can listen to the Top Forty.'

She looks at my bed. I wish I had a duvet.

'Haven't you got any teddies or dolls from when you were small?'

'I've got that ballerina you gave me,' I say casually. The porcelain figure stands in pride of place on top of my chest of drawers. 'And I've still got lots of books from when I was a child,' I say, pointing at *Crime and Punishment* and *Hamlet*.

I select my favourite nib, plug it into the wooden pen, ink-stained from use, and pull the black ink towards me. 'Want to see me do some Gothic Script? I'll write a No Entry sign for your bedroom door if you like.'

But Katie has already moved away. I carefully replace the lid on the ink bottle and unplug the nib. As I turn around, I catch sight of Katie Nelson's left hand stretching out, tentatively picking my smallest blue poison bottle off the glass shelf, enveloping it tightly, and returning to hang by her side.

'Don't touch those!' I rush over.

She freezes, looking guilty. 'I didn't!'

'Yes you did.'

'I was just looking at them.' Her pale face has acquired two scarlet stains, forming perfect spheres either side of her nose. She can't persuade her eyes to meet mine: they dance about in mid-air above my left shoulder.

'Give it back, you thief!' I point at the criminal hand.

'I haven't got it.'

We both look at the clamped fist for a while.

Slowly, with a look of disbelief, Katie unfurls her fingers.

'That is my favourite exhibit,' I inform her in my coldest voice. I retrieve my tiny bottle from her clammy palm.

'It's so small and pretty.'

'It's not yours to take.'

'Don't tell my mum and dad. My dad'll kill me.'

As I reflect on how to punish her, I realise that certain mitigating factors relating to school will have to be taken into account, otherwise I might forfeit my playground protection.

'That depends,' I say.

'Please don't tell them!' she begs.

'I can see why you did it because it's so beautiful,' I begin, in a sympathetic voice. Her white teeth emerge from behind her lips in a cautious smile. 'But you should *never* take stuff off friends or family.'

She will, of course, be banished from number eleven on a permanent basis from now on.

'I didn't mean to do it.'

‘Yes you did! You decided to take it!’ I’m glad I’ve never been tempted to tell Katie Nelson about my collection of stolen goods. Then she would be able to take the upper hand and hit me back with it at this moment. ‘I won’t tell your mum and dad, but only if you agree to help me with something.’

By the time her thirty-minute visit is over, Katie has read aloud and signed a binding contract to follow my sister on Mondays and Wednesdays between seven and eight o’clock in the evening so that I can watch my favourite programmes on telly. She will write weekly reports, due every Thursday, detailing all she’s seen. She holds the rolled-up contract at arm’s length in her left hand while I drip scarlet wax onto the seam and stamp it with my antelope seal.

Tues 20th December

Helen has stopped writing in her False Diary. It’s remained completely blank for nearly six weeks. This is the clearest sign yet she’s hiding something. I’ll have to work extra-hard to flush out the Real Diary and make it spill all the beans and pulses.

I search her room patiently for other clues. Her underwear drawer contains stretchy pants with faded Disney characters on the fronts. Knickers she’s owned since she was six or seven mingle with her more recent acquisitions, including those Mr Men knickers I spotted when she was in the bathroom.

Fri 23rd December

‘How’s Helen?’ Mrs Phillips asks. ‘We hardly ever see her these days.’

You hardly ever see her, I think to myself, glancing over at Mr Phillips to see if he looks guilty. He sits on the arm of the sofa with the *Radio Times*, feigning innocence by pretending to read. There’s a picture of Margaret Thatcher on the page he’s studying. I will locate that page after they’ve gone and, when he walks me home tonight, I’ll test him on its contents to see if he really read it or not.

‘She’s always out and about in the village, especially on Monday and Wednesday nights,’ I tell Mrs Phillips, enunciating my words carefully. I observe *him* out of the corner of my eye for a response. ‘She keeps disappearing. It’s difficult for us to keep an eye on her.’

‘That’s why I never see her. I’m at evening classes on Mondays and Wednesdays.’

Mrs Phillips is so dense.

‘Okay, let’s go. Have you got everything you need?’ He throws down the *Radio Times* and ushers her through to the kitchen.

They pull the back door closed behind them, sealing me into their world.

This whole babysitting arrangement has several pros and one serious con which I need to think about carefully before deciding whether or not to continue. The pros are, first and foremost: *he* always walks me back to number eleven at the end of the evening. We stroll down the road, just the two of us, in the dead of night, our arms almost brushing together while the rigging on the boats chimes out like church bells on the creek. I ache for him to reach out and touch me, and he almost does so on numerous occasions. I keep him talking for as long as possible, entertaining him with stories about school, or engaging him in conversations about things I’ve read in the *Guardian* or *Radio Times* while babysitting. I try to make sure most of this takes place on the doorstep of number eleven so we’ll burn holes in Helen’s ears upstairs.

A second pro is that I like earning a pound an hour in return for watching telly and exploring their house.

There’s only one major con. My babysitting is actually strengthening Mr and Mrs Phillips’s relationship. He can’t possibly love somebody as ugly and fat as her, but I’ve noticed certain subtle changes in the way they relate to each other since I started my Friday-night duties up the road. She used to nag him all the time, telling him ‘do this, do that, find this, find that.’ Now, however, when they leave the house, she often holds his hand, or she stands beside him stroking his back.

Mr and Mrs Phillips always leave the key sticking out of the lock in case I need to go into the back garden for any reason. They probably think I need to nip outside for cigarettes, but I don’t smoke. I don’t like to go near that door. After dark, behind the panes of glass, black shadows flicker and creep about in

the garden, and the cat-flap clatters on windy nights. A narrow passageway runs down the side of the house onto the drive and the street beyond. I've lurked at the other end of that passageway countless times, feeling the shadows creeping up on me from the garden.

Every surface inside is littered with books and magazines. I pick up a book called *Pure and Untouched* by Barbara Cartland. The cover has a picture of a handsome man leaning out of bed, staring at an innocent girl with long brown hair. The girl doesn't know he's looking at her. The man isn't wearing any pyjamas.

I start to read the novel, marvelling at the rich language.

I might grow my hair a bit longer.

I turn off the Christmas lights because the flashing colours are giving me a headache. The book is compelling, but I force myself to put it down because I want to concentrate on my ongoing investigation of the house.

When I open the lid of the bureau in the living room, invoices, receipts, blank forms and half-written letters cascade to the floor. Panicking, I bundle them up in my arms with no idea of the correct order, push them back inside and close the lid: it gapes a quarter of an inch open, and bits of paper slip out through the crack like tongues getting ready to tell tales on me.

The obese cat gazes at me without curiosity from its place on the sofa, then lowers its head onto its paws.

I open the bureau again with a lot more caution. This time, I carefully put my right hand through the gap and hold all the stuff in place while I ease the lid open with my left hand.

The loose documents inside all seem to relate to shop business. There are order-forms, invoices, and print-outs from suppliers. Each time I find a hand-written letter or a card, I read it. I want to find out more about *him*, his likes and dislikes, where he's from, why on earth he married *her*.

Most of the letters are to Mrs Phillips from someone called Maggie in Australia. Maggie's handwriting is really neat, although she puts circles instead of dots on her i's. Rebecca says that kind of thing is common. We must never circle our i's. Once or twice, she refers to some troubles, but I can't find any letters explaining what she means.

Stuffed in amongst the paperwork are packets of photographs. There are hundreds of pictures of Samuel and baby George. It's a shame there aren't any pictures of *him* on his own. The best I can find is a snapshot where George is lying asleep in his arms, nice and low. I'll be able to cut a straight line across his shoulders, throw the baby away, and keep the top part for myself. I tuck the picture in-between a bar of Dairy Milk and a Twix in my bag.

At the back of the bureau I see a row of compartments. Carefully, I reach into each one and pull out the contents. In amongst all the old postcards, there are some loose photos. I gaze at a faded black-and-white print of a girl standing on a sandy beach in her knickers, holding a bucket and spade, smiling up coyly at the camera. I wonder if it's Mrs Phillips when she was a girl. It's strange to think she had dark hair as a child. After that, there's a photo of a different girl, an ugly, dumpy creature with long pale hair and a doleful mouth, wearing a bikini and standing by a horse. This one is far more likely to be Mrs Phillips.

I'm amazed by the third photo: it looks just like my sister, dwarfed by an elephant at the zoo. Behind this picture is another one of the same girl, this time at a swimming pool. It's definitely not the pool in town.

I carry them into the middle of the room, hold them under the main light and examine them closely. This girl certainly looks like Helen. How could *he* take her on special outings, not me?

Simultaneously, another feeling rises unexpectedly and makes me narrow my eyes. This is the first piece of proper evidence I've found to prove that my sister sneaks off secretly with Mr Phillips.

When they return after three hours in the pub I'm sitting at the opposite end of the sofa from the cat, reading the *Radio Times*. I have borrowed *Pure and Untouched*: it's in my bag.

As usual, Mrs Phillips goes straight upstairs to check on the kids, while *he* stands in the hall, swaying to and fro quietly like a tree.

I carefully avoid looking at the bureau so he doesn't suspect anything.

He's quieter than usual as we walk down the road to number eleven. I try to think of questions that will test his knowledge of that page in the *Radio Times*, but my mind's too busy thinking about the pictures of Helen.

'So what was that little performance about tonight?' he suddenly asks, grabbing my arm aggressively.

‘Little performance?’ I’m too shocked to know what to say. Does he know I’ve borrowed a photo from the bureau?

‘You know what I’m talking about.’ He starts to parrot my voice. ‘*She’s always out on Monday and Wednesday nights, Mrs Phillips.* Why did you say it like that? I’ve had enough of all your insinuations, Lizzie. If you want to accuse somebody of something, just come out and say it. But let me warn you now. You won’t be able to pin anything on me.’

I stay quiet. I’ve never heard him use this tone of voice before. His breath smells of beer. I’m not sure how to reply. One thing I know for a Fact is that it wouldn’t be in my interests to mention my *dossier* of evidence about his games with my sister.

‘You’d better forget all your little suspicions.’

‘Okay,’ I say meekly.

I can’t think of ways to keep him talking on the doorstep of number eleven tonight.

‘Happy Christmas,’ he says and walks away.

Sat 24th December

Katie’s sound system towers out of the floor in her bedroom. It’s not even Christmas till tomorrow! This stereo is far better than the last one, which didn’t last long before it fell downstairs when Mrs Nelson was cleaning. We’re listening to Radio One, debating which tracks we like best. Katie has bet me five pounds that Number One in the charts for Christmas will be ‘Only You’ by the Flying Pickets, and I’ve started to panic as Dave Lee Travis speculates about the Top Ten.

The speakers are three feet tall, lurking in the corners of the room like security guards in shops.

‘I got you a Christmas present.’ I take the gift out of the carrier bag. ‘But it’s only small.’

This year I’ve taken special care in selecting and wrapping people’s presents. I wasn’t going to get anything for Katie Nelson after her attempted robbery of my bedroom. After fairly weighing and measuring the evidence,

however, I decided to find a present at the last minute as a thank you for helping at school. Thanks to Katie, the ball is back in my tennis court at school, and that's where I intend to keep it from now on. So I got her a wide belt in white mock-leather with an ornate gold buckle. For Mrs Nelson I chose a set of pink marble coasters. Each coaster is heavy enough to stay on the table when Mrs Nelson lifts up a glass.

I didn't know what to get for Rebecca, so I chose a china pot and matching saucer decorated with bluebells. For my sister, I finally plumped for a box of scented writing paper. If I'd actually paid for these gifts, the grand total would have been a massive twenty-three pounds and fifty-seven pence.

'I got you something, too.' Katie holds out a present wrapped in red, with two miniature gold rosettes on the top.

'Let's open them.'

When we see what's happened, we burst out laughing. Katie has given me an identical belt to the one I got her, except mine's in pale pink rather than white. We hold them in the air.

'We can share them,' Katie says, but I know that won't happen.

Sun 25th December

As one embroidered egg cosy after another tumbles out of the homemade wrapping-paper, I realise that my sister's finally lost her grip on the plot. She's stitched a whole world out of felt for our mother. Each egg cosy is embroidered with a face. One has round eyes, red cheeks, brown hair made of wool and a snarling mouth. Another has black hair, a sad mouth and green sequin eyes.

'Are they meant to be people we know?' Rebecca frowns at the face with thick-rimmed spectacles and grey hair, puts it down and picks up another. She laughs. 'Oh dear, this one looks sad. Is it a boy or a girl?'

'No one pacific,' Helen replies. You can see she's proud of her achievement.

'Specific,' I correct her poor English.

‘They’re beautiful.’ Rebecca picks each one up for a second tour of inspection. She’s really overdoing her praise of my sister. ‘Perhaps these sad ones need an egg inside them? Then they’ll be happy eggheads!’

‘Can we hurry up please?’ I point at the old telly in the corner. ‘I want to watch *The Sound of Music*.’

‘You don’t want to watch that rubbish,’ Rebecca snorts. My sister hands her a flat square parcel. ‘What’s this, darling? Another present?’

My Christmas present from Helen is a plant-pot filled with earth, painted glossy yellow on the outside in an effort to make the plastic look new, and decorated with hand-drawn pictures of the houses on our street. Allegedly there are three daffodil bulbs planted in the compost, called *tit-a-tit*, or something, and they’ll flower in the Spring. A certain amount of trust is required to believe this story about the daffodils. She’s such a cheap skate with her amateur homemade presents.

‘A vegetarian recipe book. I didn’t know you could get that kind of thing.’

When our mother finally stops humouring my sister, she asks me to fetch my batch of presents from under the tree.

I wade through the balls of screwed-up paper and bring the parcels over. My wrapping looks really professional compared to theirs. I’ve put a little gold rosette on the top of each present.

‘Please will you try not to tear the wrapping paper, because I want to keep it for next year?’ I say as I sit back down on the sofa. I pat the neat pile of paper by my seat.

Rebecca holds up the bluebell pot and saucer. ‘Thank you, darling, it’s lovely! I’ll put it on the mantelpiece in my bedroom.’ She puts my present on the floor and looks over at Helen, who’s holding the box of writing paper up to her face, sniffing it deeply like a dog in grass. ‘What’ve you got there, Helen?’

I can tell Rebecca doesn’t like my bluebell pot. A small section of the saucer sticks out underneath the wrapping from the presents Helen gave her.

‘It’s amazing!’ Helen says, sniffing and exhaling with an angelic smile. ‘Smell that, Lizzie. Lovely flowers! Like the real smell of freesias!’

‘Friesians,’ I correct her.

‘Freesias,’ Rebecca says, looking at me and laughing. She always takes Helen’s side, even when Helen is wrong.

At least my sister is making an effort to be cheerful today. I'm not surprised she's so happy because she scored a major turkey coup this year in persuading our mother to make a meat-free Christmas dinner. Rebecca said she'd cook anything Helen wanted, and they sat together discussing possible dishes for hours, finally agreeing on nut cutlets for us all instead of meat. Twenty-two million turkeys die every year at Christmas in Britain alone.

Personally I find this over-indulgence of my sister extremely irritating. These days the happiness of our whole household seems to revolve around whether or not Helen's in a good mood or a sulky mood at any particular minute of the day.

Rebecca gives me an electric clock-radio for Christmas, and she gives my sister some boring gardening books, then she hands out the presents from Dad. Instead of individually wrapped presents this year, he sent two envelopes inside a bigger envelope. You can see from the postmark he sent them from town, but he hasn't been to see us since that incident with Rebecca.

'Snap!' Helen laughs, holding her card in one hand and her ten pound note in the other. Not only has he given us the same present, but he's given us the same card as well, with a cartoon red-nosed reindeer on the front.

Disgusted, I throw my card on the floor and turn on the telly for the remainder of the film.

VI. January

Thurs 5th January

‘Happy New Year, Mr Phillips! Have you got any good card games or tricks you can show me?’ I have decided to strike while the iron is hot and repair the damage from our last encounter.

He taps the counter with his pencil and doesn’t look up. ‘Unfortunately I don’t know a single solitary card trick, so you’d better run along now so I can close the shop.’

‘Yes you do! I know you do!’

He frowns.

‘Like when you make the shopping list disappear and reappear somewhere else.’

‘Come on, then, very quickly.’ He sighs, but I know it’s only a mock-sigh. ‘I’ll read your palm. Give me your hand. Quickly!’

I giggle as he pulls my hand across the counter, unfurls my fingers, and touches my palm. This is the second time he’s ever touched me. His hands are soft and warm.

‘And what does the future hold in store for Miss Elizabeth Osborne?’

He points to each line on my hand and tells me I’ve got lots of hidden potential beneath my surface. I am going to pass all my exams with flying colours. And I am going to be a stunning beauty in a few years’ time. I’m glad he doesn’t mention getting married or having children. He knows there’ll only ever be one man for me. He says that he, on the contrary, will turn into a grumpy old man if he can’t close the shop soon and go back to the house for his tea.

Frowning, I buy a Mars Bar and wander down the road. I can’t understand why, whenever I give him the opportunity, he refuses to spend time with me. Maybe it’s because of his shyness. I can tell by the way he treats me that he really likes me. He knows I’m different from other girls my age. He doesn’t speak down to me. He’s never expressed it openly, but he’s definitely attracted by all my hidden potential. We will be specially connected for ever.

Sun 8th January

When I was younger, at bath-time I used to pretend to be a bottle bobbing around in the creek. My body was the bottle and my head was the stopper, while *me* was the message curled up tightly inside.

Tues 10th January

Rebecca slams the door as she enters number eleven, and the whole house shudders in alarm.

‘Lizzie! Get down here immediately!’

Helen comes out of her room. ‘What’ve you done?’ she quails.

There must be some mistake. I always receive outstanding progress reports at parents’ evenings. My teachers use words like ‘inventive’ and ‘imaginative’ to describe my numerous talents.

Rebecca frog-marches me into the study, pushing me in the back with her hand like a kidnapper. She slams the door behind us, then bursts into tears.

‘What’s all this rubbish about Dad and the IRA?’

I feel horribly surprised. I need to cluster my thoughts together as quickly as possible.

‘Have you gone mad? How could you tell all those lies to your teachers?’ She shakes her head and looks at me as if I’m one of the aliens out of *Return of the Jedi*. ‘Dad? The IRA? Playing the violin in London? What’s got in to you, Lizzie? You don’t expect people to believe this rubbish, do you? How can you do something like this just as we’re trying to surface from all the mess with Dad?’

My teachers have betrayed my confidentiality. I will never forgive them. Teachers can lose their jobs for behaviour like this. They’re supposed to be caring for the interests of the child, not telling tales and betraying our trust.

‘I *think* I know what you’re talking about.’ I need to use all my skills and methods and resources this evening.

Calmly, I look Rebecca directly in the eyes and explain that my teachers must have misunderstood something I wrote last term. Carefully, I move my eyes to the left, just for a split second, then return them to my mother’s face. I explain how I heard a report on *John Craven’s Newsround* about a girl who was

a musical genius and her father was a victim of IRA activities. I wrote a summary of that news report for my essay.

‘Rubbish!’ she shouts. ‘Your teachers aren’t stupid! Why did your English teacher think you were talking about us? Come on! Admit you lied, then we can decide what to do.’

I know precisely how this happened, I tell her, and it is partly my own fault. When our teacher told us to write an essay on ‘My Summer Holiday,’ I wrote my piece about that girl and the IRA.

‘Do you think I was born yesterday?’ Rebecca snaps rudely. ‘Why couldn’t you write on *your summer holiday* like all the other children in your class?’

I hold firm. All the other children in my class went away to nice resorts for their holidays. I stretch my mind and reach for some detail. I need to be as accurate as possible to make it sound true. I tell her our teacher said it sounded as if the whole world was packed into our classroom asking how to spell place-names like Burgundy, Lambrusco, Curacao, Cinzano, Smirnoff and Laphroaig. They all had *material* for their essays, whereas in our family we never go anywhere on holiday. We always stay at home.

All the way through my account, Rebecca continues to frown and shake her head. I feel as if her face is interrupting my flow of words with a long silent No.

‘I want to believe you, Lizzie,’ she says when I finish, ‘but very little of what you’ve said adds up.’

She insists that I write an apology to our teacher, and she makes me promise never to tell lies again.

I promise.

I know Helen’s been listening at the top of the stairs because I hear scurrying and scratching noises when I reach for the study door.

Out of the blue as I depart, Rebecca says, ‘Just accept it, Lizzie. Your dad walked away from us all.’

I halt in my tracks. I don’t want her to talk about my dad. What she says is completely false. He walked away from Rebecca and Helen, not me. If she thinks otherwise, then two people are liars at number eleven tonight.

Then she says, in a wobbly voice which fades into a hiccup at the end, ‘I’m your mum and dad, now. You’ll have to make do with me.’

I refuse to reply. I have nothing to contribute, especially after she's accused me of lying and then brought my dad into the conversation in order to manipulate me.

Fri 13th January

A tower of brochures advertising weekend breaks in European cities has been building up on their coffee-table since the New Year. I turn the sound of the television low and examine the new destinations to arrive in their living room. Are they going to choose Venice or Dublin, Amsterdam or Bonn, Paris or Madrid, I wonder, leafing through each glossy publication and marvelling at the mouth-watering adjectives used to plant each city in the reader's imagination.

He doesn't walk me home after babysitting any more. Mrs Phillips does.

'By the way,' she said casually as I put on my coat this evening. 'I don't suppose you've seen our dandelion paperweight kicking about, have you?'

'Paperweight?' My voice sounds authentic because I am genuinely surprised to find out that the dandelion doorstopper is actually a paperweight. If so, I'll use it to hold down my sheets of calligraphy.

'Sammy must've hidden it somewhere.' She sighs. 'My sister gave it to me before she left for Australia. Sentimental value...'

I'm going to stop babysitting very soon.

Wed 18th January

I want to be able to do more than copy. I need to create whole new sentences in her writing. Before she learned joined-up writing, it was easy to write 'H-e-l-en' on the walls, but now my sister's writing is really difficult because sometimes she scrawls, and at other times she writes neatly. Sometimes her letters lean forward, sometimes they lean backward, swinging to and fro, kicking their limbs in all directions. She also uses unreadable abbreviations, weaving her own distinctive grammar into each sentence.

Since embarking on this project a few weeks ago, I have started to understand that I mustn't just focus on learning how to reproduce the shape of each letter, as I tried to do at the beginning. This isn't calligraphy, where the beauty of each letter is the end in itself. Even though the idea revolts me, I must allow my sister's handwriting to stick to me, sink in. If I'm going to move away from mere copying towards the creation of new material, then I must allow her writing to get under my skin. I have started to understand that a perfect copy is not simply an act of perfect imitation. It involves something extra, something alive and creative, like swallowing another person's spit.

The tip of my tongue has developed tiny blisters from probing the back of my teeth all day. Today is one of the few days this week when the wind hasn't carried the stench of the bone factory into the village.

Rebecca gets home just after six o'clock, greets me absent-mindedly, pours herself a tumbler of fruit juice, and turns the oven on.

The Nelsons are on winter holiday for ten days in the Seychelles. They booked it at short notice through Lunn Poly in town. They've been gone a week already.

Katie's taking the time off school. So am I.

Mrs Nelson's skin turned bright orange before they left. She wanted to arrive at the resort with a healthy-looking suntan, she said, so she tried to build up layers of natural colour using skin dye she saw advertised in *Cosmo*. But it went wrong. She couldn't see the writing on the bottle because it was too small, and she thinks she over-applied it. She took the bright edge off the colour by rubbing used teabags on her skin. She said she wanted just the right amount of suntan to still look *European*.

I wish the Nelsons had taken me on holiday with them.

Our mother's plastic-rimmed glasses are smeared with finger-prints from where she's been pushing them up her nose all day. She barely looks at me. Anyway, if she did, she would only see a greasy blur hovering in the kitchen on the far side of her world.

'Where did I put those vegetable pasties?' She rummages around in a plastic bag.

Since the Nelsons went on holiday, I've taken to pouring myself a drink at five o'clock, just like Mrs Nelson. But since the recent tightening up of licensing

laws, the landlord down the road has refused to serve me alcohol, so all I've got to choose from is my dad's old collection of single malt whiskies at the back of the food cupboard. Rebecca didn't throw them away when she cleared out the rest of his stuff. Although I like my dad's whisky bottles because the labels and the necks have a trace of his musky smell, I much prefer the drinks Mrs Nelson makes for me, especially the cocktails, although Talisker mixed with coke and a dash of lime juice is also nice, coating my teeth with sticky sweetness.

For the first few days, each sip of whisky burnt my throat and scalded the inside of my cheeks, but I've grown used to the sensation as the drink moves down my neck like an arrow aiming for my middle. It makes me feel alive on the inside, although once or twice this week it's also made me feel near to tears. I don't know why, but I think this is because I'm really missing Mrs Nelson.

I don't like Laphroaig.

Ardbeg is quite nice.

Bowmore is okay, smooth and sweet.

'Chin-chin,' I say, sitting in my bedroom with my back pressed against the radiator, raising my glass to absent friends.

When I finish my drink, I wash and dry the glass, and place it back in the cupboard so nobody will notice. My nostrils and throat are lined with peaty flavours for the rest of the evening.

'Put the pasties in the oven when it's heated up, will you, darling, and make a nice coleslaw?' my mother says, lighting a cigarette. She jerks her hand in the air like a puppet, and disappears along the corridor to the study, leaving a sharp elbow of smoke in the kitchen behind her.

Rebecca needs total silence to write her book in the coming weeks. She says her research has reached a crucial stage. This year she will finish her book. It's her New Year's Resolution. She's decided on the subtitle, but not the title yet. The subtitle will be 'An Appreciation of Edwardian Nature Poetry.' She says that *her poets* are tragically under-rated by current generations of academics. These academics are *elitists* who privilege Modernism above middlebrow literature. Sadly they form the majority among her colleagues. She says her book will rectify this state of affairs and change their limited outlook.

When she talks like this at the dinner table, Helen and I smirk at each other and roll our eyes at the ceiling, stifling mock-yawns. In those moments, I feel that I could almost like my sister.

It's not funny, however, when Rebecca decides to say these things in public. She sounds so pompous I move away in embarrassment. The longer she stands there, the further away I move, step by step, trying to erase the sound of her voice. Whenever anyone says hello in the supermarket, or stops her in the street to ask how we're doing, she tells them about her research. People ask how she is, how we are, if everything is okay at number eleven. And she starts talking about her stupid book. She should simply answer their questions, then we can get on with our shopping and go home.

Our mother could learn a thing or two from Mrs Nelson.

Mrs Nelson says books are bad for the eyes. They cause headaches and give you a nervous twitch. Books with small print cause premature wrinkles and myopia, which is especially unpleasant for girls because glasses look very unattractive on them. I agree: just look at Rebecca. Mrs Nelson knows of one girl in Katie's class at school who had epileptic fits and went cross-eyed because she read too many books before bedtime. And Katie's only in the first year.

'Young ladies should go to sleep at night,' Mrs Nelson says. 'Have pretty dreams and wake up looking beautiful in the morning.'

The pasties are perfectly cooked under my careful supervision. I distribute them on three plates, arrange clumps of shredded cabbage and chopped tomato around each one, and call my mother and Helen to the table.

Nobody speaks. Our mother's eyes race about behind her cloudy glasses, chasing thoughts in the kitchen air.

Helen nibbles her nails instead of her food, and stares at the table.

I sit quietly, looking from one to the other. I bet the Nelsons' house is noisy at mealtimes, full of chatter and the sound of knives and forks scraping the plates clean. I finish my pasty and gnaw the dry crusts.

My sister's eaten two mouthfuls of salad.

'Don't you want that?' I ask, eyeing her untouched pasty.

Without answering, she stands up and leaves the table, heading for the front door.

I imagine her grabbing her mountain bike from the front railings and pedalling off up the road. I can't simply sit here as my sister disappears again. 'I think I'll go and see if Katie's back from holidays,' I tell Rebecca and stand up quickly.

'Don't be late, darling,' our mother says with a sigh.

I rush out. At the gate, I look left and right to make sure that nobody is watching before running straight up the road to the shop.

Fri 20th January

Mrs Phillips bursts through the door. With pink cheeks and a voice bubbling with excited laughter, she announces they have decided to go to Paris for a long Valentine's weekend.

She calls it Gay Parry and puts her arm round his waist.

'The children will enjoy that,' I say, marvelling at her freckles. It looks as if somebody has sneezed all over her. At least she's lost her bloated look since Christmas. I expect she's been on a diet.

'We're not taking them with us,' she gushes, looking at *him* in tipsy adoration. 'We're leaving Sammy and George with my mum, so we can lock up shop and have a nice time from Friday right the way through to Valentine's Tuesday.'

Her voice is full of disgusting innuendoes when she says 'nice time.'

'It's just a chance to visit the galleries and get away from the kids.' Mr Phillips fidgets from foot to foot.

Mrs Phillips strokes his arm, stretching her lips towards him in what she clearly imagines to be a seductive pout, then she delves noisily in her handbag to find money to pay me for the evening.

I am livid. Months of concentrated effort will be poured down the drain if they aren't here on Valentine's Day.

'What about the shop?' I adopt a disbelieving tone. 'Aren't you worried about closing it for so many days?'

'Right through till Tuesday!' she chirrup.

My voodoo doll has had the opposite effect to the one I desired.

‘People will survive,’ he says rudely. ‘We don’t exactly do a roaring trade. Might make them appreciate us a bit more if we close for a few days.’

On our walk back to number eleven, she chats incessantly about their Valentine’s holiday. I excuse myself rapidly when we reach the front door.

I can’t sleep. I fidget in bed, blinking at the shadows on the ceiling, trying to work out how to adjust my plan to incorporate their absence just when they’re supposed to be in the village.

VII. February

Sat 4th February

Helen's cough has started to get on my nerves. The two of us are standing side-by-side on the rug in our mother's study, swaying gently. According to my Swatch, we've been here for precisely one hour forty-seven minutes. We're not allowed to speak or move from this spot until one of us confesses. Helen's desperate to go to the toilet, but our mother won't let us leave the room.

Another ten-pound-note has gone missing from the housekeeping tin.

Rebecca drums her fingers on the arm of the chair. She smokes cigarette after cigarette, observing us closely. Every five minutes she shouts, 'Just own up! Who took it?'

The vertical lines in her forehead look like they've been drawn with a ruler.

I have stronger willpower than them both.

About half an hour ago, Rebecca tried to appeal to the innocent party's sense of injustice at being held captive like this alongside the guilty party, but the innocent party knows what would happen to her if she walked into that kind of trap.

My dressing-gown reeks of smoke. Confined like this, at least I can keep an eye on my sister.

Helen's resolve starts to crumble after two hours. Fidgeting and whimpering, she says she's going to wet herself and asks to go to the toilet.

I have no idea what my sister will do next. I'm as curious as the next person.

Rebecca shifts position in the chair. 'Not until you tell me who took the money. You know who it was, and I've got a jolly good idea. Just tell me. Don't pee on my rug!'

Knees trembling, my sister owns up to the crime.

Up-down, up-down goes our mother's slipper on my sister's backside. She still hasn't been to the toilet.

I feel a bit sorry for Helen. She's got to pay the money back from her Post Office savings account.

Tues 7th February

‘Stay outside until she’s done her business, girls. Don’t let anyone catch you if she does a you-know-what on the pavement!’ Mrs Nelson waves a tumbler at us. The dense orange liquid drink slops dangerously close to the rim, and the ice-cubes thump against the side of the glass. ‘Do up your coat, Katie!’

‘Let’s go up the road, not down, so we can spy through the window of the shop,’ Katie whispers as we hover at the top of the path, lit by the floodlight, looking left and right in the icy drizzle.

Katie hasn’t stopped asking questions since the time we saw them dancing Flamingo. Neither of us has seen anything since then, and Katie’s weekly reports contain no sightings at all. She won’t shut up about the Flamingo dance, though, and poses all kinds of impossible questions that trail off into the mist. The other day she asked me why Mr Phillips wants to play with Helen when he’s got children of his own. Why can’t he play with them instead? I said it’s because he’s only got boys. He’s always wanted a girl. Another time she asked why, if they’re such close friends, Helen never mentions their games. I knew the answer to that one, but I didn’t tell Katie Nelson: it’s because Helen doesn’t want to share *him* with me.

I wish I’d never let Katie Nelson come to observe them with me, and I regret asking her to write those weekly reports. I suspect she didn’t hide properly when I first sent her up the road, and got seen. As a result, Helen and *him* have gone underground.

‘It’s not spying,’ I insist as she struggles to do up each toggle on her coat. ‘It’s information-gathering. Anyway, we won’t see anything tonight. Helen only goes up there Mondays and Wednesdays.’

‘But she never goes up there any more, not even Mondays and Wednesdays.’

Katie’s too immature ever to be a real friend of mine. She seems to think Mr Phillips is a funny, brightly-coloured fish illuminated behind the shop window, flitting hither and thither for our personal entertainment.

We set off up the road. Shafts of light spill out of the cracks in people’s curtains and flash in the puddles.

The dog has a lead that extends thirty-three feet. Knowing the length of its freedom, it usually trots at a distance of precisely thirty-three feet, tugging at

the string like a kite in the breeze. Happily out of reach, it zig-zags across the road, knots itself around trees and dives into people's front gardens to squat on their paths and lawns.

On the rare occasions that I agree to hold the lead, like now while Katie buttons up her coat, I keep the dog reeled-in at choker length and my finger firmly pressed on the lock. The dog lurches forward, gags, is thrown into reverse, lurches forward, chokes, halts abruptly, lurches forward, gags, sits down on the wet road, looks up at me.

Katie skips up to the shop and peers in.

'Nobody there.' She sounds a bit relieved. 'Just like always.'

I hand her the lead and the terrier gusts away. We hunch our shoulders in the rain. Katie tries not to step in any puddles because she's wearing her new Nikes, but it's difficult to see the pavement in this light.

We turn back before we get to the churchyard and the dog gallops ahead, homeward-bound, name-tag tinkling on its collar.

'Let's watch a video when we get in,' Katie suggests. 'How about *Wizard of Oz*?'

'I'll probably have a quick chat to your mum first,' I reply, pressing my tongue against the back of my teeth and sucking, thinking about how the liquid clung like a sugary blanket to the side of Mrs Nelson's crystal tumbler this evening.

Suddenly the terrier stops in its tracks up ahead and stands stock-still, nose pressed against a garden gate. The lead gets shorter and shorter as we approach.

'Trixy!' Katie calls nervously. 'Come on!'

The dog doesn't move a muscle. Katie gives the lead a sharp tug, but the terrier's legs remain rigidly fixed to the spot.

Three feet away, we see what Trixy is looking at.

On the other side of a slatted wooden gate, a vast Rottweiler stands on a dark path, silently staring at Trixy with eyes like dim lamps. The small dog looks into the face of the big dog, transfixed. Predatory and silent, the big dog doesn't acknowledge us at all: it only has eyes for the terrier.

'Come on!' Katie yanks the lead. The spell is broken.

Quietly, as she is wrenched away, Trixy snuffles the grass by the big dog's gate.

Fri 10th February

I'm not surprised that Helen's sulking at dinner this evening because two hours ago Mr and Mrs Phillips drove off into the fog together.

Two cracked plastic crates sit outside the door of the shop, abandoned in the cold until Tuesday. Everything on the shelves looks stagnant when you peer through the blinds. You can almost smell the stale light as it falls through the slats.

Until yesterday, I didn't feel particularly happy about the situation either, but there was nothing I could do to stop them leaving. I struggled to think of ways to delay them. Given the way their cat wanders through the shop spraying up the vegetables, I thought about composing a letter on Rebecca's typewriter saying a team of experts from the County Council would be coming for a compulsory sanitary inspection on Monday, but I couldn't get past the first sentence in any of my drafts. Next I wrote a letter to Mrs Phillips from the Baby Clinic containing an urgent summons to an appointment on Monday morning. In the absence of any headed paper, I typed the letter on one of Rebecca's blank index cards. I was extremely unhappy with the result of this experiment because I couldn't provide a single detail about the clinic, not even its location.

In the end, I adjusted my arrangements and came up with a revised plan to take account of the situation. Now I think their absence will actually work in my favour because it gives me more time. Instead of having to post the Valentine's card on Saturday using Royal Mail, I will be able to deliver it in person, by hand, tomorrow. By royal female! And just in case *he* gets to the card first, opens it and tries to hide or destroy it before Mrs Phillips sees it, I'll take my time tomorrow and deliver some supplementary items to the house as well.

With the approach of their holiday, a sour lump has been forming in my stomach, getting bigger, spreading through my body, weighing down my arms and legs like concrete, sealing up my lungs.

Every night I lie in bed panting for air like a fish washed up on the seawall. I can't think of anything apart from *his* hands, fingers reaching out in the dark.

Something is suffocating me.

For all these weeks I've been lurking in the shadows. I can't wait in the darkness any more. I need to grasp a fistful of facts, bunch them up and not let go however hard they struggle.

Sun 12th February

Locating the garden shed is tricky without a torch, but I can't risk being seen by the neighbours. As it is, I think I saw a net curtain twitch when I bumped into the dustbin at the corner of the building.

The garden's chaotic: I kick terracotta tubs and bump my forehead on a prong of the washing-line. Finally at the shed, I fumble with the bolt and tug the door open. The spare key is easy to find, hanging on a nail of its own just inside the door.

As I close the shed door, something alive and heavy brushes against my leg in the blackness and I nearly scream. Then it meows and writhes.

The pressure behind my eyes intensifies.

I fumble for the keyhole and turn the key. All the while, I watch myself incredulously. I see my fingers with the key, my arm reaching out for the handle, but I can't feel responsible for any of these actions.

I put the key in my jeans pocket.

I've never been in this house without the children upstairs. Apart from that one incident with Samuel, the boys always sleep soundly whenever I'm here. The whole house breathes with them at night, giving shape to the air, moving in and out on a gentle current. I feel their presence in all the rooms, upstairs and down. When I'm delving around in the bureau, or nosing through the messy recesses of cupboards and drawers, I hear sneezes, rustling bedclothes, coughs, brief whimpers.

Now I feel like a ghost. I have no place here. I am nothing here.

Moving into the kitchen, eyes adjusting to the half-light, I feel a thrill in my stomach, but can't work out if it's pleasure or terror. I'm breathing stolen air. No object that I've ever taken, no matter how valuable or precious to its owner, can compete with this sensation.

The kitchen stinks of cat food. I tiptoe over to the window and tug the curtains closed. Then I switch on the lights and take a look around.

The floor is littered with heaped bowls of cat meat and dried food, enough for a week. But the obese black-and-white creature is more interested in me than the food on the floor. It bundles around my feet, purring, meowing, nudging my ankles and calves with its cheeks. Perhaps it recognises me. Perhaps it thinks I've got a place here after all.

The family's been away since last night, but the smell of their cooking still lingers in the kitchen. Above the stench of cat food, I catch a spicy aroma that's completely alien to our kitchen at number eleven.

Two stray children's books lie on the table, pages splayed open. A teddy bear eyes me from the sideboard. Half-empty jars of baby food sit on the sideboard, plastic spoons sticking out hopefully. These objects look absurd in the absence of their owners.

I move through the downstairs of the house, opening doors, closing curtains and turning on lights. The whole place is heavy with nappy smells. The rooms are covered with jetsam and flotsam in erratic patterns. In the hall and living-room, all the surfaces are strewn with children's toys. Poor Mr Phillips. How does he put up with this stench, this mess? Bumper-sized packets of Pampers and half-chewed biscuits litter the carpets. I rescue one of *his* records from suffocation by a stained silk cushion on the floor.

I open the connecting door to the shop and prop it with the wedge of folded cardboard he uses as a stop. Letters lie messily on the 'Welcome' mat. Each time a car drives past, the dull innards of the shop are illuminated through the blinds in a momentary flash.

Before leaving number eleven this evening I tucked the Valentine's card into my jeans at the back. The edges of the card bite squarely into my bum. My coat pockets bulge with the other items.

I tug on the envelope and extract it. The card's slightly dented, but it soon straightens out when I bend it to and fro.

During a lull between vehicles, I nip forward and place my card on top of all the other letters. In this light my glossy envelope looks grey, but when she sees it on Tuesday it will pulse with romantic pink, covered with kisses and the swirling letters of *his* beautiful name. The envelope will call to her from the mat. It will whet her appetite like the shiny icing on top of a cake.

The card has a picture of a teddy saying 'Be My Valentine.' It was quite expensive at ninety-nine pence, but I had to get this one because all the others had silly poems inside, like 'Sweet love, you make my heart beat true, I promise never to part from you.' I wanted a clear blank space to insert my lines.

I wasn't lying when I wrote in the card that I love him. I think about him constantly. I will marry him. These sentences were easy to compose. I wrote the whole message in my sister's handwriting and signed it with an H. Serious statements like these from a ten-year-old will definitely frighten him off and put an end to their silly games. The most difficult part of the card came when I tried to think of dirty things to shock Mr Phillips and Mrs Phillips, to really put them off my sister. I sat for hours with a completely blank mind. I inserted some phrases about French kissing and heavy petting which I remembered Those Three Girls saying when they followed me around at school. Finally I remembered Rebecca's disgusting Japanese cartoon book. I went down to the study and forced myself to look at it for a few minutes. After that, I wrote a detailed description inspired by the pictures. This used up every last ounce of my energy, and I went to bed.

My card is designed to hit two birds over the head with the same stone. First, it will force Mr Phillips to stop his misplaced favouritism of my sister by making it look as if she is in love with him. When he realises she wants a great deal more than their childish games, not only will he go off her permanently, but he will be obliged to end their connection. The second bird is Mrs Phillips, who will read the card and think that my sister and Mr Phillips have been doing dirty things together. There's no way she'll stay with him after that. In this way, the Valentine's card will act as a catalyst, speeding things up, helping me to flush out my sister and get rid of Mrs Phillips.

I close the door to the shop, walk back into the house and climb the stairs, followed by the cat.

Whenever I'm babysitting, I avoid using the upstairs bathroom because I don't want to wake the kids. It's the only room I haven't explored properly.

The mirrored cabinet contains several strange-looking objects, including a concave rubber disk the colour of flesh and the size of a small jellyfish. I jab at it with my finger and sniff it, but can't work out what it's for. Other things I recognise from the Nelsons' bathroom, such as the shaving brush, the aftershave and the clippers to snip hair out of men's noses. My brain throbs with disbelief when I see all the packets of condoms. I can't imagine Mr Phillips needing such dirty things. Taking the safety-pin from the broken zip on my jeans, I carefully prick a hole in each square packet.

When I turn on the bedside lamp in Mr and Mrs Phillips's room, the sparkle of a wide-rimmed glass bowl catches my eye on the dressing table. It's filled with *pot pourri*, sending out a strong fruity smell. For the first time I realise that the shadow of glass is solid, not transparent. In the lamp light, the shadow seems to have more substance than the glass. On top of the loose dry petals and buds in the glass bowl, a wire lizard sits alone with its head alert, poised to run.

Quickly, I dig in my coat pockets and extract the two items I brought from Helen's room. I lay them side-by-side on the bedspread. Taking Helen's Mr Men knickers first, I search for a suitable spot. I need to position them in a place that looks subtle enough to suggest she's accidentally forgotten them during a secret visit to *him*, but visible enough for Mrs Phillips to discover. I bunch them up and stuff them into the toe of a woman's slipper inside the pine wardrobe.

Just as I'm kneeling by the bed contemplating where to put the page I tore out of the False Diary, a door slams downstairs. I freeze. My other hand reaches out and switches off the lamp. My ears begin to roar. My body flops down by the bed.

The voices downstairs are muffled, but I can hear Mrs Phillips saying, over and over again, 'I locked it. I did, I locked it!'

'Maybe you forgot in the hurry.'

'No. I locked it!'

As my dizziness recedes, I try to wedge myself into the cramped space under the bed. Pressed flat, I inch along the floor like a ground-feeding fish.

Aiming for the far wall, I slowly withdraw every trace of my self into the darkest hiding place.

Their voices become more distinct. They're standing at the bottom of the stairs. The cat meows at the top.

'Why are the lights on?' Her voice is shrill, almost screaming. 'Is somebody here? Why is the cat up here? I locked him in the kitchen.'

'There's no sign of a break-in.'

She half-whispers, 'go upstairs. I'm not going up there!'

'Give me the suitcase. I'll put it in the room and take a look around.'

I'll say that I'm being pursued by a criminal gang and this is my safe house. I'll say that I'm Mr Phillips's secret daughter and he lets me stay here whenever they are away. I'll say that I left an important piece of homework here while babysitting, and that I came back to fetch it.

'Out of my way! Shit!' Like an arrow on a map, the cat is leading the way directly to me.

Mr Phillips heaves and bumps the suitcase into the bedroom and turns on the main light. I watch his feet walk over to the bed. He's wearing scuffed white trainers with two black stripes across each toe. I hear the cat purring and meowing. It minces along the bed, pacing out the full length of my hiding place.

The suitcase appears on the floor by the bed, blocking my view. I close my eyes, trying not to breathe.

'Are you here?' he whispers, and my hair stands on end. He must be able to sense my presence.

I watch his feet shuffling around. The wardrobe door opens and closes.

'Shit!' Mr Phillips says, then the light is switched off and the footsteps recede.

'Nobody here! No need to raise the alarm!' he calls in a funny voice as he descends.

'Why are all the lights on? This isn't right. Someone's been in. Let's call the police.'

I picture her sniffing the air at the bottom of the staircase with her freckly snout, smelling me up here in my hiding place.

'We're both tired,' he replies in the same funny voice. He sighs heavily. 'I think it was me. I must've forgotten to turn off the lights when we left.'

Everything's fine upstairs. Phone your mum and tell her we'll be over in a few minutes. Find out if she's called a doctor for Sammy, or whether it can wait till the morning.'

Metal bars press into my shoulders and upper arms. My nostrils and throat are coated with dust, and my eyes stream uncontrollably. As the voices move away from the staircase, I try to imagine that I'm with Mrs Nelson, sitting on the sofa sipping one of her James Bond Real Martinis. I'm not feeling hungry right now, so I don't nibble any imaginary peanuts.

The cat crawls in with me, purring. It dabs my face with a paw. I try to push it away. It dabs again. I push again. It curls up, a contented ball leaning heavily into my side. We breathe in and out together in the cramped space.

I don't know how long I've been here. The lights are still on downstairs, but the house is silent. My rib cage is too cramped to inhale properly. Long term, I know that this is a bad hiding place. I must try to get out of this house.

I nudge the cat to one side and haul my body into the bedroom, pushing the suitcase out of the way as I crawl out.

At the top of the stairs I pause and then creep down, one by one, until I'm by the living room door. After that, I run through the house to the kitchen, fumble for the key in my pocket, unlock the door.

I fall, half-sobbing, into the fresh night air.

When I get home, I realise that I left the page of Helen's diary on top of the bed. I wonder if *he* saw it? Also, I didn't put the suitcase back in place by the bed. I forgot to lock their back door behind me, and I didn't put the key back in the shed.

Mon 13th February

Mrs Phillips stands on our doorstep with the rosepink Valentine's envelope in her fingers. Its triangular tongue flaps in the breeze. Her frizzy hair sticks out stiffly like a windsock. 'Can I come in, Lizzie? I need to talk to your mum about something important.'

‘Hello.’ I try to sound calm. I went up the road after school today, but when I caught sight of *him* moving around inside the shop, my body froze and I couldn’t go in.

She hasn’t given me a single funny look yet, and this gives cause for cautious optimism. If people are suspicious, they’ll always show it in the first five seconds. When they see you for the first time after you’ve done something, you’ll see their eyes examine you and probe you in a very particular way.

I usher her in. All my hard labour will yield a rich harvest tonight.

In spite of my growing optimism, however, I decide it would be a policy error to look too confident, so I don’t try to make polite conversation, nor do I comment on the fact that she isn’t at her evening class tonight. Instead, imitating the dull conversation of grownups, I ask, ‘Did you have a nice holiday in Paris?’

‘Where’s your mum? Through here?’ Mrs Phillips heads for the open kitchen door. She walks in a jerky way, like a soldier.

‘She’s in here.’ I rap on the study door. ‘Visitor!’

When Rebecca opens the door, Beethoven spills out, rolling towards the front of the house on a wave of smoke. She masks her surprise by saying, ‘Lovely to see you!’

I can tell she doesn’t want to be disturbed tonight because her voice is too high-pitched and it enters the air at the wrong angle.

I act as if I’m going through to the kitchen, but as soon as the study door closes I return and loiter outside.

Helen hasn’t come out of her bedroom since dinnertime. This works to my advantage because it’ll make her look even more guilty when the moment comes.

Everything is quiet for a few minutes behind the door, then suddenly Rebecca howls with laughter. Nothing in my card was designed to cause that kind of response. I move closer.

‘It’s not funny!’ Mrs Phillips cries out. ‘Things like this cause trouble. It’s not a joke. This could get my husband into very deep water.’

‘I shouldn’t laugh. But... Oh dear!’

‘What she’s written, it’s disturbing. Disturbed. Listen to this.’ After a pause, Mrs Phillips reads out my line inspired by the Japanese sex-book. *I like it*

when you do that dirty thing where you wiggle your finger inside my c-u-n-t, while the cats do it on the windowsill.'

Our mother hoots and, in spite of myself, I nearly laugh too. My line sounds different when it's read out loud like this.

'Oh dear! Sorry! This stuff is so infantile. Can't you see? It's just some kids messing about, some vulnerable kids who've got hold of a pornographic magazine.'

'I certainly don't see it as just kids messing about. This could get my husband into a lot of trouble.'

'It looks a bit like Helen's writing, but listen, I really don't think we should take this too seriously. Children's sexuality, especially at that age, is...' Rebecca hesitates. 'Polymorphous and perverse,' she ejaculates enthusiastically.

'It's my husband who'll be called perverse. He's extremely upset, as you can imagine.'

'Oh dear...' Rebecca's voice trails off as Mrs Phillips reads another section of my card.

"Your hands are soft and warm when you touch me on the arm. You are the only man for me for ever. Will you marry me?" If your little girl has a crush on my husband, that's one thing. But if the police got hold of this, I can tell you, they'd turn the tables and take a very close look at him.'

I start to panic. The last thing I want is for the police to take Mr Phillips away. An unexpected sob rises quickly in my throat, like the winter tide. I bite my bottom lip to stop it coming out.

When I saw him inside the shop today, I couldn't unlock my knees. I tried really hard to push my legs forward. One of the most important Rules to remember, if you are trying to cover something up, is that you must mingle with your targets as quickly as possible. The sooner you show your face, the more likely you are to secure your escape from suspicion. But I couldn't get past the door. When somebody nudged past me, I turned and ran home.

I drank a miniature bottle of Southern Comfort in my bedroom after that, but it didn't provide any comfort.

'Let's see what she's got to say for herself, shall we?' Rebecca moves toward the door and I rush into the kitchen.

'Helen! Come down here a minute!' she calls.

After a long guilty pause, my sister emerges from her bedroom and drags one sulky foot after the other downstairs, leaning heavily on the banisters.

In she goes, and I move forward again.

‘Do you recognise this card? Did you write these things to Mr Phillips?’
Rebecca asks.

There’s a long pause. My sister says, ‘No.’

‘Just tell the truth, Helen.’ Mrs Phillips’s voice is gentle, but I recognise in it a common tactic adopted by adults to extract information from young people like ourselves.

‘I didn’t write anything.’

‘What’s going on? Is something going on?’ Mrs Phillips asks.

Silence.

‘Tell me what’s going on!’

‘Nothing! Nothing! He said I was *too old!*’ Helen’s shriek rises through the house on a shrill, steady current.

This kind of overreaction during interrogation is a very bad strategy because now she looks guilty from a thousand miles away.

‘Too old for *what?*’ Mrs Phillips’ voice matches Helen’s voice, pitch for pitch.

‘Okay, stop this! Come on, let’s drop it. I’ll have a chat to Helen later.’ I can’t see her face, but I think our mother has lost patience because Mrs Phillips can’t see the funny side of the Valentine’s card.

But Mrs Phillips won’t let it drop. ‘What do you mean, “too old,” Helen? Too old for what? You mustn’t write lies like this. Promise me you’ll never do it again.’

I think I hear them moving over to the door again, so I hurry back to the kitchen. I sit at the dinner table and gaze at the dirty dishes. I’m not satisfied with developments this evening. Although my card caused a reaction, Mrs Phillips’s behaviour has defied all expectations. There it is in writing, yet instead of driving off in disgust, leaving home as she was supposed to do, she’s attacked my sister and wrapped a protective cape round *him*. In spite of what’s written in the card, she seems to believe nothing happened. Meanwhile, I can’t stop reliving my terrifying experiences up the road. I didn’t sleep at all last night.

Things like this leave permanent scars, especially on vulnerable young people like me.

‘We had to come home two days early,’ Mrs Phillips says in a calmer voice as she emerges from the study. ‘My mum overreacted. Thought Sammy had meningitis. Called us home. This card’s the last thing I need on top of the stress.’

The front door closes. Helen runs upstairs.

Rebecca comes through to the kitchen and puts the kettle on. ‘Phew!’ she says.

‘What did *she* want?’

Rebecca sits down. ‘Helen – or some kid from the village – played a prank on Mr and Mrs Phillips. Sent a Valentine’s card. She’s all upset about it. Thinks it’s more serious than it is.’

‘But how do you know it’s a prank?’

‘Just the tone of the whole thing,’ Rebecca sighs. ‘The stuff in the card. So immature and naïve. It’s clearly a joke. If not, they certainly need their head examined.’

‘Oh!’ I say, and stare at my hands.

Tues 14th Feburary

He’s gone!

While everybody slept last night, he climbed into the car and drove away. I didn’t hear a thing.

I can’t believe it. I was so tired I slept through it all.

While the mist rolled into the village from the marshes, *he* tiptoed off. My Mr Phillips. Nobody saw him go. He simply disappeared. Evaporated. Mrs Nelson was full of it this morning. She came round to tell our mother.

What about me?

Did he hope the sound of the car would wake me so he could take me with him? Maybe he waited for me on the road, just outside my window, hoping I would catch a trace of his presence and wake up with a jolt. He couldn’t hoot or call my name because it would wake people up. Helen might even think he’d come to fetch her instead of me.

I sit in Rebecca's study playing the Bob Dylan tape I made last time I babysat, scouring the lyrics for a clue about where he might be. Did I make a mistake with that Valentine's card? I should've sent him one in my own name, then he'd know how much I love him. Why was I so shy? I should've told him how much I love him. Now I can't stop crying.

Poor Mr Phillips! He must've waited hours, tapping his fingers nervously on the steering wheel, heart racing in case he got caught. He must've felt terrible when I didn't appear. Now he's somewhere out there, all alone. If only I knew where to find him I'd take all my savings and join him.

Wed 15th February

'You did it. You wrote those things.'

'What things?'

'You know what I'm talking about.' Helen takes an unsteady step into my room. 'As soon as I saw it, I knew you'd done it. Specially that "H" at the bottom. It's your writing, not mine. Like you did on the walls. And the mirror.'

If my sister chooses to cast aspersions at me, then I will be forced, against my better nature, to adopt a formal and severe tone with her. I tell her that I presume she's referring to the *infantile* card which caused so much distress to Mrs Phillips on Monday evening. I tell her I would never be responsible for such a *naïve* prank as that.

'Why did you do it? Tell me! Why did you pretend to be me?'

I carry out a rapid risk assessment of the situation. Although I feel sorry for my sister right now (especially because she must know that there will be no more secret outings with Mr Phillips now their little friendship is public knowledge at the shop), nevertheless, when all the variables are taken into consideration, outright denial is still the best bet. Also, since *he* disappeared, and since Rebecca made those remarks about the content of the card, I'm no longer willing to take responsibility for writing it. As far as I'm concerned, that card belongs to history.

'It wasn't me,' I say indignantly. 'I reckon I know who did it, though. Katie Nelson. You know what *she's* like.'

Helen keeps placing her hand on the table, sliding a few inches forward, letting go, placing her hand down again. The neat rows of calligraphy nibs scatter in all directions, and my carefully prepared sheets of cartridge paper ruck and buckle under her fingers.

‘Be careful!’

She’s deep inside my room now, looping towards the chest of drawers. Before I can stop her, she grabs my porcelain ballerina in both hands and flings it at the radiator. The head of my statuette hits the metal with a bang and the whole figure breaks into smithereens. Only her pirouetting toes remain intact on the plinth.

‘Rebecca!’ I scream, trying to grab Helen’s arms.

My sister slithers out of my grip like a lump of soap in the bath and stands by my bottle collection making strange gagging noises.

‘Mum!’ I shout, reaching for Helen’s arms again.

Helen tries to knock the bottles in my display off the shelf, but she misses most of them. The ones that hit the floor are cushioned by the carpet.

‘*Mum!*’ I scream.

Helen kneels down and vomits on my bedroom floor. I can’t hear what she’s saying any more, except the word ‘old.’

Fri 17th February

Rebecca refuses point-blank to budge from the bedside. She’s been sitting in the same chair for a night and a day and a night and a day while the nurses move around inside the curtained space to replace drips and check the monitors.

This is my first visit since Wednesday, when we had to stay up all night waiting for news.

My sister’s hands look like dry crabs lying on the shore. Rebecca’s been holding each one in turn, covering them with salt water splashes. I give her a quick pat on the shoulder to let her know I’m here.

Helen stares at me steadily. She doesn’t move her eyes away. My face heats up.

‘Hello,’ Rebecca says, but her fingers remain locked to my sister’s hand.

‘Did they get all the pills out of her stomach?’

‘There’s no major damage. This morning she asked where she was. It’s a good sign! She’s going to be okay!’

‘When’re you coming home?’ I ask.

Rebecca shrugs. ‘I’m not sure yet, love. How’re you doing over at Katie’s house? Being spoilt rotten, I expect.’

I can’t explain to Rebecca. Even though Mr and Mrs Nelson are generous and friendly, and they’ve given me the spare room all to myself, I’ve been missing number eleven. At Katie’s house there’s too much heat from the radiators. There’s too much food on the table. I get too many cuddles from Mrs Nelson. ‘It’s all a bit too much,’ I say.

‘Sorry, darling.’

Helen’s eyes are fixed on me. Her skin’s a horrible colour, green and grey on a base shade of yellow. Inside my head I can hear her voice listing all the terrible things I’ve done. ‘Will she get better?’

‘It’ll take a long time. They don’t know how much internal damage...’
Rebecca chokes and stops talking.

Tall, silent machines lean over the bed like trees.

Liquids drip in. Fluids drain out.

The only sound in the ward is the steady suck-blow of a ventilator from the bed next-door, making a boy’s chest rise and fall. His mum’s asleep in the chair by the bed. She looks dead.

Helen’s still staring at me.

‘I’ll be off then,’ I say, handing Rebecca her Marlboro and matches.

‘I think I’ll be here a few more days.’ She takes the cigarettes and slides them into the drawer of the bedside cabinet.

‘Katie and Mrs Nelson are waiting for me outside.’

I can feel Helen’s eyes following me as I hurry away.

Thurs 23rd February

‘Call that a bob, do you? More like a pudding-bowl! Where does your mum take you for haircuts?’

‘She does it herself.’ I flick through my biology textbook with a studious expression. On a scrap of paper I’ve been designing an elegant secret code where *his* initials clasp mine. Once I’m happy with the design I’ll write it out properly in calligraphy.

‘And she’s a qualified hairdresser, is she?’ Mrs Nelson has criticised Rebecca a lot this week. I need some peace and quiet.

‘No.’

‘It’s disgraceful for a girl your age.’ Mrs Nelson slams down her tumbler, releasing a rush of angry bubbles, and reaches into her Gucci handbag. She pulls out a pink suede address book, holds it at arm’s length, and locates a number with a scarlet fingernail.

They make an appointment for me straight away because she says it’s an emergency.

‘Come along, Katie!’ she calls up the stairs. ‘Chop-chop! We’re taking this young lady for a proper haircut!’

I stuff my homework into my schoolbag for later.

Katie appears on the landing wearing the red birthday dress I gave her, a cream mohair wrap-around cardigan, and Mrs Nelson’s cerise stilettos. She’s been trying on clothes and makeup in different combinations all evening, coming downstairs and cat-walking along the corridor to the kitchen. She looks really fat.

I haven’t changed out of my school uniform. All I wanted to do after school today was sink into the sofa with my scraps of paper and a glass of bubbly.

‘Get out of those shoes! They make you look bloody cheap,’ Mrs Nelson shouts.

Mrs Nelson drives the Cortina like an ambulance into town.

‘Cheri’s the best hairdresser round here,’ she explains as we tear along the country roads. ‘Senior stylist, very experienced for her age, used to work at Head Case and Hair Necessities, but now she’s nicely settled at Hairobics. Did my perm.’ She glances in the rear-view mirror and pats her tight yellow curls. ‘They always start having babies just when you’ve got them trained.’

‘Mum, slow down! I feel sick.’

Mrs Nelson plugs in the Simon and Garfunkel tape. ‘This’ll calm you down.’

The walls of the salon are plastered with posters of models with shiny suntans and hair that looks synthetic. The whole place smells strongly of chemicals.

Leaning back in the chair, exposing my throat like this, having a strange woman’s fingers in my hair makes my heart race uncontrollably. I try to concentrate on breathing slowly, in out, in out, but this reminds me of the ventilators in hospital, so I stop. But now I can’t remember how to breathe without thinking about it.

Once I’m upright again, Cheri lifts handfuls of my wet hair in her fingers and moves closer to examine each clump. ‘How would you like it cut?’ she asks, pumping the swivel-chair with her foot.

There’s a haircut I’ve secretly wanted for ages. ‘Can you do me a Princess Diana haircut?’

‘A nice bob please, Cheri,’ says Mrs Nelson, laughing.

Mrs Nelson sits down to read *Cosmo* and Katie goes across town to tell her dad to meet us at Pinocchio’s for dinner.

All around me are women in white gowns. They sit completely still, leaning back, heads half-lost inside metal domes. I watch them in the mirrors. Some of them have closed their eyes. Stylists hurry to and fro, checking the monitors, making incisions with scissors, putting on plastic gloves, delicately unwrapping little plasters and prodding people’s heads with tongs.

I don’t like the way I am bound to my chair in this white gown.

I need fresh air.

‘Stop fidgeting, please,’ Cheri says, drawing a comb through my hair and snipping slowly, strand by strand, with exaggerated flicks of her wrist. ‘Uncross your legs.’

I don’t like the way she presses her stomach into my head. ‘Will you be finished soon?’

‘Not yet. Magazine? Cup of tea?’

Before I know what’s happened, I’ve flung off Cheri and I’m standing in the cold street outside, gasping for air.

I can’t work out how I got to be on the wrong side of the door.

A man walks past and winks at me. 'Didn't like your haircut, eh?'

Katie runs down the street. 'What's the matter? What're you doing out here?'

'Come back in!' Mrs Nelson shouts through the door. 'You're only half-done!'

Katie puts her arm round me. She smells strongly of cigarettes. 'You okay?'

'She was standing too close.' Scarlet with embarrassment, I wish I was sitting quietly in the chair again.

Cheri stares at us critically through the smoked glass.

Katie opens the salon door. 'Lizzie thought she was going to faint. Can you give her a couple of minutes? We'll be in again soon.'

'Thanks.' My whole body feels limp.

Katie laughs suddenly. 'Watch out, they'll think you're pregnant! You should see the way Cheri's looking at us.'

When we go back inside, Cheri accelerates the pace of the haircut. She doesn't speak to me again.

I don't recognise myself in the mirror when she's finished. My hair looks like a glossy wig, ruffed up and perched dangerously high on my head.

I slip my arm through Mrs Nelson's as we walk down the High Street to Pinocchio's. She smells strongly of sweat, and her forehead looks damp. 'I'm really sorry about what happened. I felt dizzy.'

'It was ever so stuffy in there. Full of ammonia.' She gives me a brief smile, but I'm sure she thinks I'm ungrateful.

Although the bill came to ten pounds, the only thing I can think to do is refund the cost of the haircut.

'No!' Mrs Nelson says firmly. 'My treat. Don't mention it again.'

Mr Nelson is at the table already with a glass of beer. His tan leather jacket hangs over the back of his chair. He wolf-whistles at me when we approach. 'Look at you! Well! A real lady!'

There's a picture of the *Leaning Tower of Pisa* on the wall. The town of Pisa is the birthplace of all pizzas, Mrs Nelson tells me.

‘We always come here. The desserts are rubbish,’ Katie complains, sitting down heavily in the chair next to her dad. ‘Can’t we go somewhere else for a change?’

‘It’s the best food in town,’ Mr Nelson replies. ‘You must have a steak, Lizzie.’

I try to remember all the rules of politeness Dad taught us as children. I unfold the linen napkin and place it on my lap. My mouth is dry, but I don’t reach for the jug of water because it’s on the other side of the table, beside Mr Nelson’s elbow. I remember to say please and thank you when placing my order and, to be on the safe side, I choose ‘medium rare’ for my steak because it’s the middle option out of three completely unknown choices.

‘Mercy bow coop,’ Mrs Nelson says when the food arrives.

We start to eat.

Blood runs out of the meat when I try to cut it. I gulp each piece down with a mouthful of wine so I don’t have to chew. It takes quite a lot of wine to get the lumps down.

‘You alright, Lizzie?’ Mrs Nelson asks after a while as she tops up my glass. ‘You’ve gone very quiet.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Poor love.’

I cut the remainder of my steak into minute pieces and slide each one surreptitiously into the napkin on my lap. My head spins when we get up to leave, but I manage to throw the meaty parcel under the table without anybody seeing.

Fri 24th February

A crusty black nose, stained yellow whiskers and a pink tongue insert themselves through the crack in the bedroom door, followed, as the door creaks open, by a pair of adoring black eyes.

The pink tongue extends and rasps across the nose.

‘Go away!’ I purse my lips and close *The Lord of the Flies*.

It was a mistake to read my second-favourite book again. I needed a distraction because I was trying to stop thinking about the way Helen is threaded with tubes as if somebody has started to sew up her seams and wandered off in the middle of the job. But the story has changed. The printed words are all in the same position on the pages, but the characters seem different. I try to recapture my old way of seeing the island and the boys, but I can't stop feeling sorry for that fat one. I used to think he deserved what he got. I wanted to hurt him too, but now I want the others to stop torturing him. I want the ending to be happy.

Trixy tunnels silently through the carpet, crawling on her stomach, a rogue white streak causing a ripple in the livid pattern. She tries not to meet my eyes and worms her way over to me, halting just beyond the radius of my feet.

'Shoo!' I throw a fluffy cushion in the shape of a monkey at her, and it hits her head with a thump.

Instead of running away, she holds her ground. Growling, she pounces on the monkey and clamps her teeth over its fluffy rump. The cloth makes a splitting noise. She shifts position. Now she's standing directly over the cushion, sinking her jaws into its neck.

'Drop!'

She tugs on the monkey's arm, half-severing it from the body. I watch her jaws closely and wait for the muscles to relax for an instant, then grab the cushion and throw it back on the bed. She jumps up and leaps on the monkey, extracting toothfuls of stuffing from the open seams, spitting white blossoms all over the room.

We play tug-of-war with the cushion until it's in shreds, except I'm not playing any more. I don't want her to destroy the monkey. I want to rescue it.

I'm not one hundred per cent certain, but I don't think I'm in love with Mr Phillips any more.

Sat 25th February

Mrs Phillips plays with a biro on the counter, spinning it on the flat surface. When it comes to a halt, the nib points directly at me.

‘But you must have *some* idea where he’s gone,’ Mrs Nelson explodes indignantly. ‘He’s your husband after all!’ She waves her hands in the air. ‘Why haven’t you phoned the police?’

Mrs Phillips keeps rubbing her eyes. ‘Is there something I can get you from the shop?’

‘What if he’s lying in a ditch somewhere?’

‘The police would have contacted me if that was the case,’ she replies. ‘I’m sure he’s fine.’ Her eyes are more piggy than ever, narrow little slits with puffy pink lids.

I hover by the window and stare out at the road. Every time I look at the interior of the shop I think *he’s* going to magically reappear out of a trapdoor and point an accusing finger at me.

Against my better judgement, Mrs Nelson persuaded me to accompany her on this mission to find out the truth about Mr Phillips.

The whole shop smells different. Not one of the packets and tins looks the same as before.

‘How’s your little sister doing?’ Mrs Phillips asks me gently. I’m not sure I like the way she keeps talking to me.

‘They’re going to send her to a special unit.’ I can’t breathe again.

‘Up the loony-bin,’ Mrs Nelson says. ‘Unusual for a little girl, isn’t it?’

Mrs Phillips ignores Mrs Nelson. ‘They’ll get her back on her feet in no time. I hope she got my card? I’m so sorry this happened to her. I had no idea that he... I’m so glad I had boys.’

‘If you mean boys are less of a worry than girls, I choose to disagree!’ Mrs Nelson walks over to me and puts an arm around my shoulders. ‘All that violence. Drugs. Gangs! I’m glad I’ve got my Katie. And Katie’s got Lizzie here,’ she adds with an encouraging squeeze.

‘Try not to worry too much,’ Mrs Phillips says to me.

Mrs Nelson tries to steer the conversation back on course. ‘If my husband vanished in the middle of the night, I’d be on his case, I can tell you!’

I’m not going to speak because anything I say may be taken down and used in evidence against me.

‘What can I get you from the shop?’ Mrs Phillips asks Mrs Nelson.

We buy a bag of oven chips from the freezer.

Sun 26th February

‘Is Helen in hospital because Mr Phillips has gone away?’

Katie’s question makes a certain amount of sense to me. I’ve been struggling to connect the two events myself. But however much I think about it, I can’t understand why *he* disappeared. Of all the possibilities contained in my Valentine’s card, this was the most remote. Katie’s question doesn’t solve the riddle, but I feel as if she’s threaded a needle and tied a knot at the bottom of the strand, ready to make the first stitch. She deserves a certain amount of credit for showing she’s capable of independent reasoning like this.

Mr and Mrs Nelson look at their daughter, then at each other, with bewildered expressions.

Mrs Nelson takes a sip of wine, swallows, and dabs her pink lips with a napkin. ‘Now, why would you say something like that, baby?’

‘I don’t know. I was just thinking.’

‘What were you *just thinking*?’ Mrs Nelson saws her slice of beef. The room is silent and very warm.

‘Nothing.’

Sticking out her tongue a fraction of an inch, Mrs Nelson raises her fork and the tender mouthful goes in. She holds the handle of the knife in her fingertips, with her little finger poised in a delicate hook.

By now I’m sitting forward in my chair, eagerly waiting to hear what Katie says next. I hope Mrs Nelson doesn’t interrupt and put Katie off this line of reasoning.

‘He probably got bored of being nagged by his Mrs all the time!’ Mr Nelson drags his fork over his plate, scraping up all the gravy and lifting it quickly, dripping, to his mouth. ‘Big bossy-boots, that one. Two screaming kids. Not that I think he *should’ve* done it.’

Mrs Nelson looks at her husband indulgently. ‘Don’t you go getting ideas, now!’

‘Wouldn’t know which car to take!’ He laughs, but he looks a bit sheepish. Then he turns to Katie with a sombre face and says, ‘stop dwelling on it.’

Mrs Nelson nods. 'Ten-year-old girls don't try and top themselves. When she's better and the doctors talk to her, they'll find it was all a terrible mistake. She probably thought they were sweeties.'

'People should be more careful. Strong pills like that. Lying about in the house.'

Mrs Nelson nods vigorously, eyes me, and swallows a mouthful of wine.

Katie frowns at a roast potato. 'But,' she says, turning to me, 'what about that funny game we saw Mr Phillips playing with Helen, where she hid down behind the counter, then he did the Flamingo dance on her face?'

Mrs Nelson blanches. '*What* dance on her face?'

I want to see what shape Katie has created out of all the pieces, but she seems nervous about starting.

'You tell them, Lizzie. You must've seen it loads of times, but I only saw it once.'

I shake my head. 'No, you say.'

'Jesus Christ!' Mr Nelson shouts, jumping up.

Katie doesn't sound as confident as she did. She starts to whine. 'I only saw it once. Helen was crouching down. He did this jiggy dance in her face, then she ran into the shop and he used tissues on her hands. Lizzie says it's called Flamingo. That's right, isn't it, Lizzie?' There's panic in Katie's voice.

Suddenly Mr Nelson turns on me. 'Another one of your tall stories?'

'No, Dad! It's true! She didn't make it up. I saw it too.'

Mrs Nelson rushes around the table and cradles Katie's head in her arms.

'I'll deal with this.' Mr Nelson throws his napkin on the table and marches towards the phone. We hear him asking for the police. After a pause, he says, 'No, the man disappeared a couple of weeks ago.'

I can see Katie's eyes peeping out of Mrs Nelson's fleshy arms like a crocodile in a swamp, but unlike a crocodile she's looking out with extreme alarm. I try to give her a reassuring smile, but I can't get my mouth to smile properly because I know this situation spells big trouble for me.

Mon 27th February

‘Help me hide!’ I whimper.

‘Are they here?’ Katie turns pale.

‘They’re going to lock me up!’

We’ve known they were coming since last night. I paced the bedroom all night trying to work out a plan. I wanted to disappear like Mr Phillips, but I couldn’t be sure whether or not there was a police car waiting outside the house, watching, ready to arrest me. And unlike Mr Phillips, I had no get-away vehicle, not even a bike.

My knees feel like jelly. I fling open Katie’s wardrobe door, pull all the clothes out of the cubby-hole, and try to climb in. But the hiding place is too high up and I’m shaking too much to be able to get inside.

I race downstairs and disappear through the connecting door into Mr Nelson’s garage just as the two figures approach the frosted glass. The doorbell rings.

It feels like ages before they come to get me. I’m underneath the Ford Capri in a pool of black oil.

First of all, a pair of sensible brown shoes appears by the front wheel, attached to slim ankles in grey tights.

‘Hello Elizabeth.’

The woman has a husky voice a bit like Rebecca’s. She doesn’t try to bend down to get a look at me. She just stands there. I stare at her feet silently.

‘I’m Barbara Foster, the social worker assigned to this case. There’s no need to be scared. This isn’t your fault. We just need to ask you some questions. We’ve spoken to your mum, and she knows we’re here.’

‘Where’s my dad? I want my dad.’ I’ve got no control over what I’m saying.

The feet shift. ‘Unfortunately we couldn’t get hold of your dad. But your mum phoned you this morning, didn’t she? She’s sorry she can’t be here while we talk to you. She needs to stay at the hospital with your sister.’

‘Why can’t you bring my dad?’ I’m whimpering like a dog.

‘We tried. He simply wasn’t contactable, I’m afraid. Perhaps you would like Mr or Mrs Nelson to be in the room when we talk to you? Your mum suggested Mrs Nelson.’

Before I can think, my mouth says, 'Mr Nelson.' I don't know why I said his name instead of Mrs Nelson's. I imagine Mrs Nelson pursing her lips and saying, 'suit yourself, little madam.'

'Are you coming out, then, Elizabeth?' the woman with sensible shoes asks gently. 'Sorry we can't bring your dad. You get on well with him, by the sound of it?'

Even though I know she's using the voice grownups adopt when they want to manipulate children, I can't help thinking Barbara Foster sounds quite nice. She seems interested in what I think and feel. And this is the first time anybody's noticed how close I am to my dad.

'I'm just like him,' I tell her as I emerge from my safe place.

Barbara Foster has light brown hair and a smile that stretches all the way across her face. She leans over slightly in my direction, but she doesn't try to help me stand up.

'Let's go through when you're ready. There's no need to hurry. Take your time. You'll need to change out of that top. It's all oily!'

Barbara Foster is a social worker, and I know for a fact that social workers, like teachers and nurses, are obliged to help and not harm vulnerable young people like me. But the other woman standing in the Nelsons' living-room, the tall one, turns out to be from the police. I've walked into a trap. At first I think she's another social worker because she isn't wearing her uniform, but when she introduces herself, I sit down with a thump.

They stay in the living-room and interview Katie first, with Mr and Mrs Nelson present. I have to wait upstairs to stop me escaping again. I put on my black Dorothy Perkins top.

There are far too many grownups in this house for my liking.

After a while, I sneak out and hover at the top of the stairs with the dog. We both listen. I strain to hear what they're saying, but can't decipher the murmuring sounds. At least nobody's shouting. Nobody's getting angry.

I walk over to Katie's bedroom and look out of the window at the creek. White smoke curls out of the bone factory chimneys.

All I wanted was for their secret games to stop and for *him* to pay me a little bit of attention. That's not too much to ask. Now their secret has caught me and wrapped itself round me like underwater netting tangled in a rudder.

The living-room door opens, releasing voices into the hall. One of the strange women laughs. Perhaps this interview won't be too bad after all.

Barbara Foster comes upstairs. 'Okay, Elizabeth. We're ready to ask you a few questions now. Don't look so worried. It's okay! There's nothing to be scared of. Nobody's going to accuse you of anything.'

The last thing I see before going downstairs is the creek mud glistening in the winter sunshine, sprinkled with gulls, outside Katie's window.

Now it's Katie's turn to wait upstairs with Mrs Nelson. I try to read Katie's expression as we pass each other at the living-room door, but she offers no clues except a look of immense relief.

'We have come here to ask you a few questions,' the policewoman says. She has a pointed nose with a wart growing out of one nostril. I don't like the sound of her voice, cold and official. 'Your mother knows we are talking to you today. Is that your understanding, too?'

I can't stop staring at the wart.

'Is that correct, Elizabeth?'

I briefly catch Mr Nelson's eye. He nods. I nod.

When Rebecca phoned this morning, she said we need to find out exactly what's been going on with Helen in recent months, and that I must help with any information I can offer. She kept repeating herself, saying I must be truthful and not hide anything. I must tell them exactly what I've seen. But what would change if I told them the truth? Are secrets the same as lies? Can I reveal Helen's secret without also revealing my lies?

'I'll write things down as we talk,' the policewoman says. 'This is to make sure we get your answers right. To start with, Elizabeth, can you tell us your full name and address?'

I've seen this kind of thing on telly, where the detective pretends not to have any information at all, not even a person's name or address, and this causes the suspect to become falsely confident. As a consequence, the suspect digs a deep, muddy hole and climbs into it without even knowing that the hole is there. But I don't want to get off to a bad start with this tall warty woman, so I tell her my name and address, speaking carefully, all the while examining each word to find out whether I'm still balanced on the edge of the hole, or whether I'm trapped inside it yet.

‘Thank you,’ she says, writing in her notepad.

‘Well done,’ says Barbara Foster enthusiastically, as if I’ve passed an exam. ‘Would you like a drink of something?’

I nod, and she pours me a glass of Pepsi from the bottle on the table. As she puts the glass on the table in front of me, she smiles. The bubbles dance like midges on the surface of a pond. ‘You’re doing fine! I expect you’re feeling a bit strange, aren’t you, having to stay here and not being at home with your mum?’

‘I always come here. She works late.’

‘I see.’ Barbara Foster looks over at the tall warty one.

Mr Nelson says gruffly, ‘never at home.’ I can’t work out if he’s referring to me or Rebecca.

In my opinion, these two women are not particularly intelligent. They are missing a solid gold opportunity to find out everything. When Barbara Foster discovered me in my hiding place, I was too terrified to tell anything but the whole unbroken truth. Now, even though these two are pretending to be professional with their notebooks and pens, they still haven’t asked me a single proper question. The tall warty one can’t even be bothered to wear her police uniform and badges.

‘Let’s move on now, shall we?’ she says. ‘I want to ask you about some people from the village. Mr and Mrs Phillips at the shop. Do you know them?’

‘Yes of course.’

‘Do you know when they moved in?’

‘Last summer.’ I remember the lumbering shadow of the removal lorry, the warm air, the light evening, and the way Mr Phillips flitted through the shop and stopped directly in front of me, smiling.

‘How often did you go to the shop when they first came?’

‘Not much.’

‘And your sister, Helen. Do you know how often she visited the shop?’

‘I don’t know. Hardly ever.’ I can’t bring myself to look at the policewoman’s face in case she sees I’m lying.

‘Did she go there when the shop was shut?’

‘I can’t remember. Maybe.’

‘Try to remember. Do you know if Helen went to the shop when Mrs Phillips was out?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on!’ Mr Nelson interrupts. ‘Katie’s already told us. You tell the truth, now!’

The social worker hushes Mr Nelson, saying she and her colleague will ask all the questions. ‘Did your mother know when Helen was at the shop?’ she asks gently.

Barbara Foster is okay because I can answer all her questions easily. Whenever I speak or lift my head, she nods at me encouragingly and smiles.

‘No,’ I say. ‘She just went up there whenever she wanted.’

‘How did you know she was there, not somewhere else?’ the policewoman asks.

We are moving into extremely dangerous territory. I wish Barbara Foster would interrupt and tell the tall warty one how well I’m doing.

Now the policewoman’s questions are direct and swift like darts. What’s worse, she acts as if she knows all the answers already. Mr Nelson won’t take his eyes off me. I feel as if I’m trapped in a dome of glass like the bird on the mantelpiece, being stared at by all these grownups.

I try to be as evasive as possible. I can’t work out whether revealing Helen’s secret is the same as telling the truth because the truth includes all the things I’ve done alongside my sister’s games with *him*. Helen has kept a secret whereas I have told lies. Is there a difference between the two? Secrets are clean and transparent, while lies are dirty and blurred. When I tell a lie, each part of the story forms a layer that sits on top of the other layers. There’s no firm kernel hiding underneath, waiting to be found.

But now I’m lying about Helen’s secret.

‘Let’s move on. The doctors say your sister swallowed a lot of pills. Is that right?’

I nod. My heart’s racing.

‘Do you know why she swallowed all those pills?’

If I’m not careful, the details of the Valentine’s card will emerge and then I’ll be in trouble.

‘Please can I go to the loo?’ I ask the social worker. Mr Nelson snorts. Maybe they don’t call it a loo in this house. Maybe I should call it a toilet.

‘Of course. I’ll take you.’

‘I know where it is.’

‘I’ll accompany you. I’ll wait just here for you to finish.’ She stands in the corridor.

As I lock the door and sit down, a disorderly queue of questions jostles my mind. I need to give these people a clear story, one which will take them off the scent of how I saw Helen in the shop with him those times. I need to offer one simple statement to make them sympathise with me and to stop them talking about my sister as if she’s the special one.

Barbara Foster breaks the silence. Her voice sounds muffled and sad through the door. ‘We know this is hard for you, Elizabeth. We’re sorry we have to ask you these questions.’

We return to the living-room and sit down.

‘Actually, I think he was secretly in love with me,’ I say.

‘Who was in love with you?’ the policewoman asks. ‘Please be specific.’

‘*Him*. Mr Phillips.’ It’s much easier to pretend to reveal a secret than to untangle the series of lies you’ve told.

‘What makes you say this?’ the policewoman asks carefully.

At last I feel the finger of suspicion moving away from me. Now the two women ask a lot of questions about *him*. I describe how he taught me to juggle with clementines, how he put his hands on my shoulders and legs, how he taught me lots of different card tricks and games, and how we finally danced Flamingo on the blue and grey lino.

Unfortunately the tall warty woman keeps interrupting my flow with stupid questions like ‘do you know what time it was?’ and ‘what was the weather like?’ She obviously isn’t concentrating on her job because she keeps repeating the questions she asked before, confusing me.

‘Did you say apples or clementines?’

‘Apples. I think I said apples.’

‘What time was it when you juggled with the apples?’

‘Did you forget to write my answers down or something?’ I demand. ‘I answered all these questions already.’

Barbara Foster smiles at me and says there’s nothing to worry about. They want to double-check that my information is correct. Now I see what’s

going on. They're deliberately trying to corner me because I can't remember what I said earlier on.

'What time was it when you juggled with the apples?'

'Was it four o'clock?' I ask.

Mr Nelson's staring at the carpet, frowning.

'Did your mother know when you were at the shop?' Barbara Foster asks.

'I didn't mention it to Rebecca,' I reply.

'Rebecca? Do you always call her that?' the social worker asks.

The policewoman writes something in her notepad.

After that I shut my trap because if there's one thing I want at the moment, it's for Rebecca to come back to number eleven so we can all return to normal. I think it's about time my mother took responsibility for the neglected members of her family. I can't possibly allow my answers to prevent her from returning home, so I sit in silence and try to think of a plan.

'How about we come back tomorrow? We can pick up where you left off?' Barbara Foster asks.

Meanwhile, the tall warty woman makes it crystal clear that she will come back as often as necessary to ask her questions and clarify my answers. I need to offer them something to make them leave me alone, so I present them with a fig leaf and an olive branch.

'I'm not very good at talking,' I say. 'But there's lots more I'd like to tell you. Lots of facts and information. And details.'

The policewoman snaps, 'Good. See you tomorrow, then!'

'No. I don't want to *talk* to you about it. Can't I write it down instead?'

Barbara Foster looks at the tall warty one, who shrugs. She looks back at me. 'Well, I suppose that's okay. But we'll need to arrange another date with you soon. To talk to you again.'

When they leave, the tightness in my chest evaporates. For the first time in ages I can breathe without feeling dizzy, and when I look at other people they don't seem distant or blurred.

Mr Nelson sits silently in the armchair, head turned away from me.

'Poor love! They've gone now.' Mrs Nelson bustles around, then sits next to me and gives my shoulders a comforting squeeze. 'Silly girl for hiding! It's not your fault!'

Katie comes downstairs from the bathroom.

‘Come and sit with me, princess. Tell Dad and Lizzie what they asked you,’ Mrs Nelson says, adding bitterly, ‘I didn’t interrupt you that much! They had no right to keep shushing me like that. Cheek!’

‘I just told them what we saw that time,’ Katie tells me. ‘How we looked through the window and saw them dancing Flamingo. I told them how I didn’t see anything all the times after that.’

With horror, I realise she’s referring to her weekly reports. I’m not sure what the policewoman would make of our arrangement. Was Katie stupid enough to mention our secret contract of employment during her interview? If so, I’ll have to emphasise her unreliability in my written account, how she’s a shoplifter and bottle-thief, certainly not to be trusted as an eye-witness.

‘Did he do something bad to Helen?’ Katie’s voice quavers. ‘Will they find him and arrest him?’

‘If they hadn’t kept telling me to shut up, I could answer your questions,’ Mrs Nelson says bitterly. ‘I simply wanted answers to some basic questions.’ She looks at me. ‘If you’d let me come in with you, Lizzie, I’d have a bit more information.’ Then her chest heaves. ‘Poor Lizzie! Would you like to go over to the hospital and tell your mum all about it?’

‘No.’ I shake my head. ‘Is it okay if I stay here?’ I urgently need to start planning my document to save myself from future interrogations. I don’t want to talk to those two women ever again.

Tues 28th February

The winter sunshine bounces off Dad’s glasses and I can’t see his eyes. All I can see is my face reflected twice, once in each lens like a pair of identical twins.

‘Beautiful day! Let’s go out somewhere rather than sitting in.’ He leans forward to give me a hug and tries to kiss me on the cheek.

I hunch my shoulders, face burning uncontrollably.

‘Nice haircut!’ Dad’s face, neck and arms look patchy and leathery like a dry lump of beef.

‘I had it done ages ago.’

He gets the message. ‘Sorry I haven’t been able to see you, Lizzie. I’ve been trying to find a place to live. And a job. I’ve had to prioritise things. And hospital comes top of the list at the moment.’

If I repeated what I told that policewoman yesterday about what Mr Phillips did to me, he’d soon find out who should come top of the list at the moment

‘Hey, Lizzie. Do you know how to ask someone in German if they’d like to do a poo?’ He interrupts my thoughts, speaking in a cheerful voice.

I shake my head and look over my shoulder. I don’t want Mrs Nelson to emerge from the kitchen and start talking to him about yesterday. Today I’m going to have my dad all to myself for a special day out. We arranged it last night on the phone. At the hospital, Rebecca told him about my interview and gave him the Nelsons’ number.

He adopts a comic German accent and raises his hand in a Nazi salute. ‘*Durst du do doo-doo?*’

I laugh at top volume to ensure that Katie, up in her bedroom, can hear what an excellent rapport I’ve got with my dad. My laughter’s so loud it explodes out of the front door and cartwheels up the path to the road.

In reality, however, I don’t think my dad’s joke is remotely funny. I’m learning German at school, and what he said isn’t even half-German. ‘To do’ isn’t ‘do’ and ‘poo’ isn’t ‘doo-doo.’ I remember how he and Rebecca used to chuckle in amusement during dinner when one or the other told a joke. They would play ping-pong with words, batting them back and forth across the table. As their puns got increasingly complicated, they would go into convulsions of laughter, shutting me out.

In the awkward silence that follows, Dad fidgets with a bunch of keys. ‘Want to go for a walk? Have a chat about yesterday?’

He doesn’t have a musky smell any more. I inhale vigorously, seeking the lost scent, but all my nose can find is a hint of lavender washing powder.

‘Can’t we go into town for a Big Mac?’

In planning today, I’d imagined us starting out at Macdonald’s for an early lunch, followed by an hour’s clothes shopping, then the cinema for *Trading Places* and perhaps a bite to eat afterwards at Pinocchio’s. I don’t want to discuss the interview with him because I still can’t work out whether or not my

story about Mr Phillips fits with what Katie said. Mr Nelson, who was present at both interviews, has hardly spoken a word to me since then.

Dad says, 'Sorry, love, I haven't got the money for meals out.'

'Not even for a special treat? Please?' I hear myself wheedling.

'Let's go for a walk on the seawall. I've got to be at the hospital for lunchtime. We're sorting out Helen's transfer arrangements.'

I look at my Swatch. 'But it's half ten now.' I try not to let my disappointment show because I know Dad can't bear sulky behaviour. That's one of the main reasons he left Rebecca, in my opinion.

We quick-march down the road and turn left through the boatyard.

A thread of water trickles along the centre of the creek, forming a sharp line that divides the mud banks on either side.

I struggle to keep up with Dad. I can't ask him to slow down because I don't want him to think I can't do it. He strides ahead, feet thudding firmly on the path.

The cold air stings my eyes and I squint in the sunshine. I keep tripping over tufts of grass.

After half a mile or so, Dad slows his pace. I wait for him to speak. I'm sure he's got a significant announcement to make because he keeps breathing in and pausing. Each time he exhales, his breath becomes visible like a speech-bubble in a cartoon. But the bubbles are empty of words.

When we reach the wrecked barge, we halt and sit side-by-side on the seawall, gazing at the blackened ribs jutting out of the mud.

'Want to talk about yesterday?' Dad asks.

After Barbara Foster and that policewoman left, I sat in the bedroom and secretly composed a list of my crimes. Each crime stood out beside its neighbour like a bead on a string digging into my neck.

1. Trying to poison my sister to death.
2. Breaking into Mr and Mrs Phillips' house.
3. Stealing large sums of money from Katie and Rebecca.
4. Forging other people's handwriting in order to make things happen.

One or two more commonplace offences need to be added to the string, like telling lies to people at school, taking things from the cloakroom and

shoplifting in town. But everybody I know is guilty of petty theft, especially Katie Nelson.

After writing it, I destroyed the list immediately.

‘They wanted to find you to be here too.’ I try not to let my voice sound too accusing.

‘I haven’t got a number at the moment, love. I’m staying odd nights here and there with friends.’ He looks across the mud, which shimmers in the sunshine, forming a smooth blank surface. ‘Sofa-surfing. Not pleasant, I can tell you.’

I decide to offer him an exit clause. ‘Yes, but I bet Rebecca didn’t even try to contact you.’

‘Lizzie! Don’t be so horrible! Your mum’s trying her best in very difficult circumstances.’

‘She makes up all kinds of stories about you. She says I used to follow you round when I was small. She doesn’t like the fact we’re so similar.’

‘You did follow me around. You wouldn’t let me out of your sight. You burst into tears whenever I disappeared from view.’

I can’t understand why he’s taking Rebecca’s side rather than mine. I’m the loyal one, not her. He shouldn’t repeat her story just because they’re both adults.

A greylag goose roots around on the saltmarsh, panning the foliage for edible stems. Closer and closer it comes, beak moving rapidly to and fro, ignoring me and Dad. From afar it looks grey all over, but now I see the flash of white beneath its tail and the detail of an intricate bodice, a subtle mosaic of grey and brown feathers.

I look for the rest of the flock, but can only see herring gulls.

I stare at a bundle of rope half-buried in the mud and wonder if I should tell my dad about some of the things he’s missed while he’s been away. What would I start with? School? Helen’s special friendship with Mr Phillips?

Dad picks at stalks. ‘Do you think that man abused Helen? Did you see something?’

Suddenly he starts to cry. Tears stream past his down-turned mouth, which looks exposed and raw in the absence of his beard.

I look at him, appalled. ‘Stop it!’

Shoulders heaving, he says, 'I can't stop thinking about it. What that man did to her. We need to know what happened. But I can't bear the idea of what might've happened.'

'I saw them.'

His noise halts. 'What did you see?'

The distance between the sides of the story is too vast to cross. Helen's secret. My lies. 'I told them everything yesterday. Don't worry, Dad. They were only playing games. Card games, hide and seek, dancing. It's because he wanted a girl, and he's only got boys.' I gaze at the graylag for a while. 'Why don't you come back and live with us, Dad?'

'I can't see Rebecca agreeing to it after all this time,' he says quietly.

Even though I wouldn't admit this to a single living soul, my dad is cowardly and indecisive. He lacks motivation. He gives up too easily. He's passive. I was always the one to help and encourage him at home.

'I'll persuade her.' I insert a cheerful, problem-solving tone into my voice, but I know I sound crestfallen in the face of all this negativity.

He sighs. 'No. There's no point trying. It's all such a mess.'

'You're useless! You can't do anything!'

'Don't attack me, Lizzie.'

'You've changed.' I stare angrily at the bone factory, roof and chimneys looming through the trees, exposed in the winter sunshine.

'You don't understand a bloody thing. You're the one who's changed!'

A sudden cackling and gabbling noise makes us look up. A loose V of geese passes overhead, heading for the salt marshes at the mouth of the estuary. The graylag near us launches into the sky.

Suddenly, a smile spreads over Dad's face. He gives me a playful smack on the arm and grins. 'Naughty Lizzie! Trying to blame me for everything!'

Wed 29th February

'Please stop!' I beg from the doorway. Every time she drops a fresh glass, a picture of Helen flashes across my eyes, throwing my precious ballerina at the radiator and toppling my bottles, then collapsing in a bony heap on my floor.

‘Fuck off!’

Katie ran upstairs, closed her bedroom door and turned on her stereo the instant she heard the first tinkle of glass, but I hung around because I thought she’d listen to me.

The Waterford crystal shatters in an explosion of light. Shards of glass stick to the toes of Mrs Nelson’s slippers. I want to grab her hands and tie them up so she can’t do any more damage.

‘Please come and sit down! I’ll make us a cup of tea.’ My voice is almost a squeal.

Starting with the tumblers, moving through the wine glasses and ending with the champagne flutes, Mrs Nelson has smashed her way through the entire set. It’s the opposite of drying-up and putting away. She takes each glass from the cabinet, holds it high above her head and releases it. She has studiously ignored me for the last ten minutes, but now she staggers through the broken glass and lurches at me, pointing a finger at the ceiling. ‘Ger ourra my shite!’

She turns around and makes a bee-line for the dinner plates.

I run through the connecting door to the garage.

Wearing oily blue overalls, Mr Nelson tinkers with his Ford Capri and whistles along to a tune on Radio Two. Pieces of the car lie in haphazard patterns all around him on the floor. He seems to have no inkling that the family home is being destroyed from within.

‘She’s breaking everything!’ I feel as if I’m telling tales. But I need him to stop her from destroying all those beautiful things.

‘Stay in here for a bit. No point trying to stop her.’ He wipes his hands on an oily rag.

‘What’s the matter with her?’

‘She won’t remember in the morning,’ he replies. ‘Stay in here for a bit. Be alright in the morning.’

‘But she’s breaking all your things.’

‘Leave her alone. She’ll be okay.’ His voice is firm. He wipes his hands on the rag again and looks around. ‘Where’s that broken doll of yours?’

I bring my box over to the workbench and take off the lid.

Inside, my ballerina lies on a crackly bed of tissue paper. Pieces of her head are positioned at the top of the box, and her chest, skirts and legs lie

roughly where they used to be when she was whole, with the severed feet and plinth at the bottom. I've tucked the hands and arms around the edges, wherever there's space.

She looks like a mosaic version of her previous self.

'Give us a look.' He leans over, frowning, picks up a segment and examines every edge. His fingernails are ragged and dirty. 'Nice clean lines. Good quality china. Want me to get you a new one? Haven't got the same one. Want a different one from the shop?'

'I like this one. Can't we try to mend this one?'

'Worth a try.'

He rummages in a toolbox the size of a sink, taking out clamps, masking tape, wooden splints and Araldite. I ask why he doesn't use the new extrastrong stuff everybody's talking about at school, and he explains that good craftsmen need more than a split second to decide how to mend broken objects.

He squeezes equal parts from the two tubes of glue and stirs them together with a matchstick. The mixture looks like snot. When I joke that it smells good, he tells me to promise never to take that turning or go down that road.

We line up each fragment. He carefully presses each piece into position, wiping away the excess glue with a clean rag that looks just like one of Mrs Nelson's blouses.

Nose almost touching the china, he fixes each limb with a splint and tape.

I'm concentrating so hard I don't hear anything apart from his breathing and the satisfying click as each piece slides into position. Slowly, the familiar figure rises out of the board, and we leave her standing in the garage, shrouded in tape until morning.

Thurs 1st March

The rigging rattles against the masts and, further off, a faint clatter fills the air from the bone factory.

I sit at my table by the window in the peace and quiet of number eleven, home at last. The spotlight I borrowed from Rebecca's study illuminates the first

page of the deluxe hardback notebook I got from W. H. Smiths the other day. Rebecca has challenged me to a game of Scrabble later on, but first I want to write some things for Barbara Foster and warty-nose.

The paper in this notebook is really good quality.

My calligraphy pen is poised in my hand. I dip the nib in the bottle of black ink, but I'm not sure where to start. My notes form a neat pile beside me, ordered by date, but I've crossed out a lot of material from my rough drafts. Before beginning, I will open the dictionary and study it, so that I can be in control of the best vocabulary and the best combinations of words.

I pull the notebook towards me, then pause and look through the glass.

People disappear so easily.

THE END

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